
How To Get Marketing Right

by JOHN R. GRAHAM

Experienced marketers shake their heads in amazement. “How could a first-class company run an ad like that?” That refers to an ad that is 100% focused on them. It’s all about who they are and what they do.

Whether it’s an ad, a proposal, a news letter, an e-mail bulletin, a brochure or a web site, the story is the same. It’s all about them.

As soon as we turn the page and see such an ad or click into a web site that’s overflowing with the “It’s all about us” message, we’re gone.

Yet it happens every day. “Seeing potential requires vision” states the headline for a large financial institution in a national daily newspaper. And guess who has the vision? Flip the page in the same newspaper, and a major microchip manufacturer gets it right. This company “has an urgent message for the wired world: unwire.” That resonates. Both ads required hefty budgets. One made the advertiser feel good; the other got through to the customer.

In another section of the same newspaper, a full-page ad got it wrong. The headline stated that the company “extends its CRM leadership.” Everyone inside that company feels proud. But that doesn’t make sales.

Turn the page and Lexus hits the target with a customer-capturing headline: “Think cloud nine with a silver lining.” That pulls in the customer. We all want a silver lining.

How does it happen that some hit the mark and others can’t find the target? It’s certainly easy to sell a self-serving ad to a client.

There is a more accurate explanation, however. Marketer Harry Beckwith notes “I cannot walk into most companies without being aware of their walls. The walls seem to do more than keep the cold air out. They seem to block out a clear vision of the world.” He goes on to suggest that there is nothing devious about such behavior. “It’s just that people talk about what they know, and what people know is their company.”

“There’s the rub,” as Shakespeare would say. The major problem with most marketing is that it’s all about the wrong people. The focus is on what we know best — our company, our products, our service, ourselves. And somehow or other, we expect the customer to make the right connection and say “Aha! That’s exactly what we need.”

Absorbing the Self-Absorption Problem

Self absorption is no minor problem. It’s perhaps the major impediment to effective marketing. Its impact is extensive. Here are a few examples:

- A prospective client asks a marketing firm executive if he had done some work for a particular

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company. "I hope you didn't do their brochure. It was full of the 'we' word." Fortunately, he hadn't. It was written and designed in-house and was all about "us" instead of "them," the customer.

- Most business letters are all about "us" too. They are about what "we" sell and what a good deal "we" give our customers, and that we are a leader in "our" industry. On and on it goes. This is no small matter either. One recent letter contained the words "we're excited" three times as the writer, a marketer, no less, described internal changes in the company. Who cares if they're excited? Does it really make any difference to the customer? And does it not send a powerful, unavoidable message that the company's primary concern is with itself? Oh, yes, this is the same company that seems to delight in using such terms as "strategic alliance" and "strategic partner." The underlying mindset, however, betrays the truth.

Pick up a press release at random and what are the first words you see? Chances are it's the name of the company. As any good PR intern knows, the opening paragraph should be the hook, to grab the reader, particularly the editor.

Quite often, top management is the worst offender. They want their "truth." A marketing agency had worked for months with the marketing director of a well-established regional insurance broker to develop a new capabilities brochure. What emerged was an

eye-catching, customer-focused marketing piece. Having received approval to go to print, the marketing firm had the brochure on the press when the marketing director called and said, "Don't go any further. The president wants some changes." It didn't take much imagination to figure what "changes" were going to be made. To start with, large full color photographs of the chairman, CEO, and president, not surprisingly, the father, oldest son and youngest son, in that order, were featured in the new versions, along with a detailed history of the company. One president expressed it this way: "If I'm paying for it, I want it my way." As any seasoned marketer will tell you, "That's more common than pumpkins at Halloween."

The end result of such "It's all about us..." arrogance is epitomized by the telephone call that we all get every day. It almost always goes something like this: "We sent you a letter with some information about our company a couple of weeks ago. I hope it was of interest to you." Can the callers be serious? Perhaps they are because the tone is such that I feel guilty if I don't remember the mailing.

The Missing Message

What all this adds up to is "A Case of the Missing Message." What is it that we want customers, prospects, editors, investors, competitors or anyone else to think when they encounter our company, products and services? What picture do we want in their heads? What feeling do we want invoked?

Unfortunately, these questions generally go begging. Everyone is so focused on selling something that the customer is all but for-

gotten. We are so self-absorbed that we fail at the task of separating ourselves from our competitors.

If you ask executives what sets their company apart from others, the answers are pathetically predictable. After looking at each other in stunned silence, they mumble something about "our people" or "our service."

When thinking about these companies, there's no confusion. The image is crystal clear:

- Sony (innovation and design)
- Volvo (safety)
- Southwestern Airlines (low fares)
- Pepperidge Farms (quality)
- Godiva (great chocolate)
- Mont Blanc (superb writing instruments)
- Wal-Mart (low prices)
- Starbucks (enjoyable experience)
- Maytag (quality)

But what about these companies? What do we think when we think about them and their products or services? Are the images impeccable and crystal clear when you think of these brands?

- General Motors
- Mr. Coffee
- Kodak
- K-Mart
- Cadillac

Even when we boldly announce the benefits of doing business with us, self-absorption may color our thinking. Value-added, for example, means what we decide is valuable, not what customers really want. What does the customer value? Isn't that the only important question?

The "price is too high" problem may be another indication of self-absorption. Although salespeople pass along the message to management that a customer is going with the competitor because "Our price is too high," there's reason to doubt that price is actually the bullet that shoots

down a sale. More often than not, the customer is sending a totally different message: low perceived value. It's simply tied with a pretty "the price is too high" ribbon.

No company is deliberately self-absorbed. It happens because we're captured by the ideas, culture, opinions, perceptions and history that surround and encapsulate us. We are captured and don't know it.

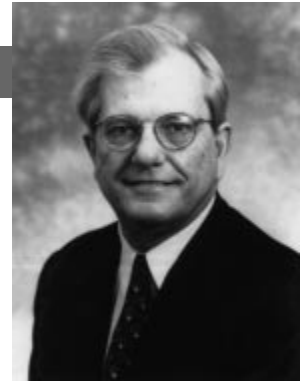
Every type of business has its own language. Even companies possess parochial vocabularies to make communication easier. Without even realizing it, we are always talking to ourselves. We are literally fish out of water when we encounter new vocabularies, ideas, histories and cultures.

Again, without being conscious that it's happening, we assume that others think like we do, and we have difficulty understanding how anyone could possibly hold a position contrary to our own.

We get our business information from our peers. It's normal — we talk to people like ourselves. Is it any wonder that we have trouble telling the story so that it

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makes sense to customers, prospects and anyone else?

The Versailles Peace Conference that followed World War I was held in the great Hall of Mirrors. Years later, we note the failure at Versailles might have been avoided if it had taken place in a hall of windows, where the delegates could have looked out at the needs of the world instead of being preoccupied with themselves.

Getting It Right

The marketing task is one of raising the blinds and throwing open the windows to let in the lights, smells, images, problems, news and everything else, so that we become one with the real world, and it becomes part of us. The answers to effective marketing are out there. □

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