

How to Use Marketing Communications to Dominate Your Industry

by

John Waters

MarCom Resources

If you're a B-to-B organization with at least average market penetration and resources, a decent reputation in your industry, and smart people on staff, you can become the market leader using the power of marketing communications.

Here's how.

First, in spite of the old adage "never assume", we're going to go ahead and assume that you are in a realistic position to become the market leader. The product/service portfolio is aligned with market needs. You have the distribution, internal support infrastructure, production capability, and reasonable financial resources. If not, stop here; you have some prep work to do.

Next is something you've likely already done, but it should be revisited. Define and understand precisely who your target customers and market segments are. You deal with this every day, but sometimes it can get a little fuzzy because of opportunities you've pursued, or ruts you've fallen into. Have a very sharp and clear focus on who you *can* serve best...and who it is *in your best interest* to serve best. If there's a conflict there for whatever reason, it needs to be resolved. Or, it can help you decide on an appropriate hierarchy of target market segments for going forward. And perhaps some opportunities to gear up for.

With the target market picture clarified, it's time to invoke the "never assume" rule. Although you deal with them every day, you're looking at your markets through the prism of your own business, so it's easy (especially for HQ people) to develop less than accurate perceptions about customers' real needs—the benefits they require as opposed to the product features you're offering. So, get in their shoes. Understand their goals, what they need, and obstacles in their way.

Now for the killer ingredient that will bring you some real separation from the crowd of unworthy competitors. Ingrained in your corporate culture should be an ironclad commitment to making your *customers* succeed. That's more than the usual clichés about quality and service and customer satisfaction or, “delighting customers”.

Market leaders do more than just provide quality products or services. They take an abiding interest in their customers' success and find ways to help customers thrive by using their offerings. One of the best examples of this is Tom Friedman's description in *The World is Flat* of how UPS becomes intimately involved in their customers' logistics and supply chain operations. Needless to say, they're far more than a delivery service. While it's true that not every company can get as deeply involved in their customers' businesses as UPS, most can find ways to make meaningful contributions to their success (this is where the need for smart people comes in).

That commitment to making your customers succeed should be expressed in a constructive mission statement that will be truly relevant to your target customers, will set you apart from the crowd, and create the internal culture necessary to become the market leader.

A mission statement that flows from your commitment to help customers succeed—one that's concise, to the point, and meaningful to them—is your basis for differentiation and the starting point for a whole range of internal and external communications. Something like: “To help (*insert target market*) succeed with (*insert your product category, or your contribution*)”. Or “To help (*target customers*) build profitable volume through (*whatever service*)”.

The mission statement should make it clear that your business exists to help your customers succeed. Otherwise you're just talking to yourself. There's no need for great creativity or artistic turning of phrases here. Just say it.

This kind of market-focused mission statement will help you produce some very powerful internal and external communications. You want everyone in the organization to understand that you're all about the customers, because you're going to be promising customers that you're all about them.

By now you're probably thinking there are a lot of preconditions to this business about achieving market leadership through marketing communications. But what it comes down to is: you can't lie. You have to be real. You're going to be putting out messages that are really relevant to people...that put a really positive glow on your company. And if you can't deliver, the whole thing will backfire.

The dirty, little secret is that working to build a good marketing communications program has a lot of really important side benefits. It forces you to confront customer-centric issues that can easily get relegated to the back burner...not because anyone really thinks they belong there, but because inner-directedness is an insidious disease. It can cause you to put customers second without even realizing it.

So job #1 is recognition that you are there for your customers...in every possible way, and in some ways that you haven't even thought of yet. Just be aware, that will take you out of your comfort zone. You will be looking at products and services outside your immediate expertise. But that also means you'll be seeing future needs and opportunities.

If you can accept all this, and get the mission right, now you can use marketing communications more effectively than any competitor. It's not all that complicated, but will require commitment, focus, attention to detail, and some legwork.

First, set the following objectives for the program:

1. Establish an identity as the foremost expert in the industry, trusted source, and provider of help.
2. Get conversations started...with potential new and existing customers.

That's it...uncomplicated, but direct, precise and measureable. Simple tracking research, with a benchmark study at the outset is all you need to know how it's going. Ad hoc conversations, compliments, etc. will be a less sophisticated, but useful measure. Achievement of #2 will be self-evident. Are your people getting into new conversations with existing or potential target customers about doing business with them?

Note that this isn't about lead generation. It's about getting into meaningful dialogues that can lead to business. And you'll make that happen through specific strategies.

Speaking of which, here are some key marketing communications strategies designed to achieve your leadership identity and get conversations going. There will likely be others, unique to your situation, but these will be essential for most.

- Develop the takeaway idea. This is what you want your targets to retain. It's what you want them to come away with from your communications in whatever medium. It's how you want to be remembered. Advertising people often call it "positioning". It's really a restatement of your mission (which is all about helping customers succeed) with maybe a few more specifics. It should directly address issues/concerns/benefits that your target cares about, and how your organization delivers what they need. This is not about how good your products or services are, it's about how your business operates to deliver relevant, needed benefits. If you get this right (and you will after all that work on the mission statement), it will provide all the differentiation you need; because I'm willing to bet most of your competitors don't do it very well. If you don't believe that, look up Fortune 500 mission statements on the web, and see how self-centered virtually all of them are. The few notable exceptions really stand out.
- Use a zero-based approach to media selection and scheduling. In B-to-B marketing it used to be easy: run ads in the top trade pubs, send out press releases, go to the same trade shows as everyone else, do a catalog and a few sell sheets. In today's topsy-turvy,

ever-changing media environment, it's essential to find out what media your targets are really using. With the proliferation of new electronic and social media, habits have changed. So we can't make the same, easy assumptions any more. Don't spend money to shout from the rooftops unless you know the right people are down there listening. There's more research work involved and, especially in B-to-B, it's not easy to get the information you need. But the good news is that today, there are many more ways of getting your message out inexpensively or free. On the other hand, the new media require more time spent on updating and staying fresh.

- Craft dramatic, preferably short, to-the-point headlines/messages, based on the positioning, and tailored to each of your selected media. You may need more visuals than in the past, perhaps more video. You'll need to be prepared to be interactive, but that's a really good thing, because one of your two main goals is to get into conversations. Today's media makes that so much easier.
- Arm your salespeople with the right materials and support services. This will, of necessity, be customized to your own situation; but everything you provide should, in its own way, emphasize your company's ability to help customers succeed.
- Get out and about. Participate in your customers' industry or industries. Do workshops, seminars, events, in-house educational activities. Get to know the editorial people at the trade pubs/websites that serve your customers. Don't just send press releases extolling your company's virtues. Find ways to help them with *their* editorial needs. Also get to know, and offer help to the staff at your customers' trade associations. These folks are always looking for help with their conferences, trade shows, etc.; and it will bring you invaluable opportunities for informal contact with key executives.

That's about it. What you're really doing here is building a brand, which will likely be your company name. And that brand will represent something of such value to customers and prospects that your company will be perceived as a cut above...giving your people the edge they need to take it to the top.

#

© 2015 John Waters. All Rights reserved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Waters is a marketing content writer and communications strategist. Clients have included national companies, midsize businesses, startups, and trade associations. His business experience includes senior marketing positions at Red Lobster Restaurants, Ramada Hotels, W. R. Grace, King & Prince Seafood, and management positions at two major advertising agencies. For more information, visit www.marcom-resources.com. Or call 912-223-3001.