

Marketing Your Service:

On Becoming **Visible**

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You check into a hotel. How do you know your room is clean? You visit a lawyer. How do you know she is competent?

You stop at a tailor's shop. How do you know he will sew a hem correctly?

We encounter services like these every day. Since services are a process, not a tangible product, how do we evaluate them?

By what we see.

In a very specific way, it is what we see—the visual clues—that represent a service. The chocolate on your pillow, the plaques on the wall, the ribbon tape measure—they all identify the quality of a service and the expertise of the practitioner.

Current and prospective clients evaluate independent technical communicators the same way: by what they see. Why? Because we provide a service too—it's at the core of what we do. We inform readers; we instruct them on how to perform certain tasks; we persuade them to act in a certain way. While much of our work centers on the written word—our product—marketing our service requires more than that. We must also pay attention to how customers perceive our service. So, independent contractors and consultants must carefully create, present, and manage the visual clues and nonverbal behaviors that represent our services.

Your goal: to have clients perceive you as an expert practitioner and better appreciate the service (and by extension, the product) you deliver.

Let's examine this goal a bit more. I'll start with the difference between marketing a product and a service; next, I'll focus on some specific visual



clues that can speak highly about your service; and finally I'll present some nonverbal behaviors that embody you, the practitioner.

The Difference Between Product and Service Marketing

A product, you can see. It is tangible, and you can evaluate its quality with a fair degree of accuracy. You can heft it, hold it, hug it, feel it, with as much tactile fulfillment as you want. Before you buy a product, you know pretty much what you are getting. And once you get a product, you use it. You know when you have it and when you don't; you know when it works and when it is broken.

None of this is true of a service. A service has none of the tactile features of a product; you can't heft it, hold it, hug it, nor feel it. A service is bought sight unseen. And you buy a service based on...what? Subjective factors such as past experience, good reviews, and testimonials, as well as your perceptions of the practitioner and his or her abilities. You make the most informed decision you can. You decide to buy the service and agree to pay for it. *Then*, you get the service.

Because a product and service are so different, they must be marketed differently. You can use words to describe a product's features, but marketing a service also depends upon nonverbal communication—your visual clues and behaviors.

There is one other crucial difference between a product and a service—one whose advantages you can deftly exploit. Rarely does a user get to meet, much less know, the people who make a product. Buying any service of substance, on the other hand, usually involves meeting and often developing a professional relationship with the provider of that service. With attention to the right details, you can use this personal interaction to your advantage. It's your nonverbal communication that defines the foundation of these interactions and helps build a strong relationship that elevates you in the eyes of the buyer.

Make Your Service Visible

Your service must be tangible to be fully appreciated. Take a critical look

at your physical surroundings and everything that represents your service. Look at your office and decorations, your clothes, your marketing materials, your stationery and presentation materials, your Web site—anything, in fact, that can be construed as your service's package. Presenting your package well indicates that your service is superior.

Start with Your Office

Think back to our lawyer. Let's say her office furniture and decorations are impeccable. Sure, anyone can buy this same furniture and hire an interior decorator. And yet, this office has been carefully considered. And that alone says something positive—that this lawyer is thoughtful about all aspects of her profession.

Consider my own experience. When my company was transitioning to a full-service graphic design agency, I organized a focus group of four trusted business colleagues. Their overwhelming advice was to upgrade my office. At the time, we were in a bottom floor office of an old mill renovated through urban development. A lovely place, to be sure, but its old wooden floors and exposed ductwork did not fit our new company image.

As fortune would have it, an office in the most prestigious, historic office building in downtown Burlington became available through a bankrupt tenant (who also happened to be a competitor). The third floor office we rented boasted three fireplaces, high ceilings, oak trim, and wall-to-wall carpeting. It was impressive. We moved in within three weeks.

About a month later, a representative from the American Nurses Association walked in, expecting to find our competitor. Instead, she discovered us. I'll never forget what she said: "Well, if you're in this office, you must be good."

Review Your Marketing Communication Materials

How do you present yourself if you don't have a public office or if clients do not visit your office? In these cases, your marketing materials become your office.

Printed and electronic materials should be well designed, well written,

and employ vivid photographic and graphic images. Electronic materials, such as your Web site, should be easy to use and navigate. Their designs—and messages—must be consistent.

Want a good example? Visit the Web site for Vanguard mutual funds (www.vanguard.com). This is Vanguard's "office." While Vanguard is a bit larger than your company, there are still lessons to be learned here. Theirs is a text-heavy site, cleanly presented, with a simple logo and a small photograph. Click the link for Personal Investors, then again for Planning and Education. Notice the similarity of all the pages. Now request some information from their PlainTalk library. After these materials arrive in the mail, compare them to the Web site. Notice how elegantly a message can be communicated through such a simple, consistent design.

Consider Your Presentation

Do you deliver materials in a plain manila folder, or in a well-designed and impressive presentation folder? People do indeed judge a book by its cover.

Consider your briefcase. I use a backpack to carry my paperwork and computers; it's incredibly functional. For business, however, it just doesn't present the right message. So, when I'm visiting a client, I switch to a soft leather briefcase, taking pains to organize it and make it presentable, right down to the very pens I use. I change because of one simple fact: a briefcase appears much more professional than a backpack. A small thing like a briefcase sets the tone for your relationship: one of business.

Fill your briefcase with pertinent information about your meeting, organize it well so that information is at your fingertips, and include other items that might interest your client or that might come up during the meeting. You must know what is in your briefcase (and what is not) and be able to retrieve it quickly. In other words, be prepared. When you are, your meetings will move smoothly and you will attain your goals.

Eliminate Concerns

Most people worry when they purchase a service. They may have heard all

about you and your reputation, reviewed your past work, read your testimonials, and responded positively to your visual clues, and now, they have decided to buy. But they have also heard all the horror stories from others who have purchased similar services—or had their own negative experiences. Your job is to eliminate these concerns. How best to do that? By your behavior.

Communicate Nonverbally

Create a strong relationship through strength of character. Then cement that relationship with professional, respectful behavior.

Let Your Actions Speak

Let others discover who you are and how good your work is. Never praise yourself directly; let others praise you instead. Self-aggrandizing talk is always received skeptically. Clients and prospects more readily accept genuine praise from recognized experts or former clients.

Many of us find our service providers—dentists, hairdressers, plumbers—through word of mouth. So treat every client as a marketing opportunity: If they like your work, they'll tell their colleagues (who will tell their colleagues and continue the trend). You can formalize this process by requesting testimonials from past clients. A few words of praise from a respected client can communicate your excellence much more clearly than mere boasting.

Speak Highly of Others

Compliment others' work; never criticize. On-site contractors can easily fall prey to violating this rule. Employees begin treating you like one of them, making you privy to internal machinations and politics. While this insider information can be helpful, use it in a positive way, such as understanding and better managing your client.

This can be difficult at times, such as when dealing with an intractable employee of your client who, it seems, everyone else in the company is bashing. But stand outside the political and gossip circles of your clients. Doing so reveals a higher character, one that many people struggle to attain.

Be Generous

Generosity has its own rewards—you just don't know what they are going to be. That's the wonder of being generous. Others will appreciate your generosity and return the gift. That is the power of reciprocity. When you unexpectedly do something for someone, you engender a strong desire to return the favor. You also stand out and become more memorable. And when you are clear in the minds of clients and prospects, they look more favorably upon your work and think about you more readily when they have additional work to perform. Think about it—wouldn't you rather work with someone who has shown you the gift of thoughtfulness?

Be Honest About Yourself

It creates trust. No one is perfect, and when you can recognize your failings, others will trust you to speak honestly about yourself and your work. Tell the truth, even if you believe it might hurt you. Ultimately, it will not. While that might appear antithetical, most people value honesty above perfection.

Keep Your Promises

Deliver on your agreements, preferably prior to the deadline. When you deliver as expected, clients come to rely on you. Reliability cements a working relationship: To buy your service (and recommend it to others), clients must be able to believe what you say. Make sure they do.

Create Comfort

Make it easy for clients to deal with you. Be approachable and receptive. Be the one to whom others turn for answers. By responding to ideas and concerns in a thoughtful manner, you'll become the cream that rises to the top in any discussion that involves your expertise and consideration.

Simply put, be positive. People don't like to be shut down or to be told flatly that their request is impossible (or worse, crazy). If you're positive, people will count on you to receive their ideas well, and they'll turn to you rather than an unenthusiastic competitor. Of course, this doesn't mean that you have to accept their ideas as presented, just

that you should be open to a constructive discussion. And you may even learn something new.

Listen Actively

Understand the depths of what your clients say. Many people have difficulty clearly expressing the problems they wish to solve. By reframing the issue in different words, you not only demonstrate your comprehension, but also help your clients better understand their own situation. Think about how powerful that is: Someone comes to you with a muddle of thoughts, and, because you listen actively, you both leave the discussion with greater clarity.

Think about your own situation for a moment. How many people do you know who actually listen—truly listen—to what you say? You tend to confide in these people because you trust them to listen carefully and respectfully, and to provide constructive ideas. Likewise, listening to clients shows that you care about them. When clients know you care, they trust you to take that original thought muddle and produce positive, tangible results.

Choose Your Words Wisely

Consider your vocabulary. Use your words to create clear, specific, vivid messages. No waffling or ambiguity here.

When you are articulate, two things happen: First, through your active listening (!) and your commanding vocabulary, you clarify an issue. Second, since you've chosen your words thoughtfully, you say what you mean. Both are valuable and sought-after communication skills. Clients don't want to get the run-around; neither do they want to expect one thing only to discover that you meant something entirely different. Clients want answers, and they want you to provide them, now. When you do, you create a sound business relationship.

Be Passionate

What is it about passion that attracts? Passion stimulates a stronger commitment to a purpose. It indicates to a client that you are not just going through the motions. You are going to put more

(continued on page 41)

(continued from page 15)

than just your expertise and experience into a project—you're going to put a piece of yourself into it, too. Doing so suggests that you work at a higher level. From you, clients will get more than the usual, quotidian treatment that they can get from any service provider.

So be passionate about what you do; clients will notice and react positively.

Connect

As our communication vehicles become more electronic, they also become less personal. This impersonal communication increases people's drive for connection. Take an interest in people; create genuine human connections. People like to do business with people they like. (Don't you?)

It's easy to create connections. Write clients short notes. I use postcards; I buy a bunch wherever I go. Postcards are interesting, distinctive, and handwritten, which provides a personal touch. Since they don't have to be opened and there's not much text, people tend to read them. And, if you're lucky, they tack up the card.

Give clients small gifts that you know they will appreciate. Food is great—everyone eats. Consider something available only in your area. I'm from Vermont, so I've taken to giving small bottles of maple syrup.

Recognize clients' birthdays. With a little investigation, you can easily discover this information. (A client of mine posts employee birthdays on the company calendar.) Send them an electronic card, or simply call them.

These small gestures create familiarity. Clients don't like surprises. They tend to choose that which is most familiar. Since they have dealt with you before, they know what to expect. And of course, you've already made sure they can expect the best.

Serve

The root word for service is *serve*. Never lose sight of that fact. Serve your clients. If you can do what they ask, then do it with verve. If you perceive that you can provide additional assistance, ask how you can help. You'll become the

source for your client needs; when they want something done, they'll contact you.

Ultimately, all of these character traits lead to a solid foundation, a solid interpersonal relationship that will inspire confidence in your service.

Create the Reality

As with all marketing efforts, marketing your service is an ongoing activity. It begins with planning: Decide how you want to be perceived, then create the visual clues and nonverbal behaviors that engender that perception.

Although perceptions are subjective, there must be a reality—the reality that you deliver your service better than your competition. Nothing kills a professional reputation faster than mediocre work. You must make concerted efforts to continually hone your skills, and update them to benefit the shifting needs of your clients.

So look around you. Find other service providers whose images you appreciate. See how they present themselves, and use these ideas to create your own identity.

When you can do this, you separate yourself from the pack: You become more visible. And that visibility leads you on the trail to success. **❶**

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