



**Low Price, High Quality and Excellent Service
Marketing at its Lowest Level of Influence**

When you think about your company's competitive position what comes to mind? Quality? Great Customer Service? Competitive Pricing? No doubt, these are attributes every company seeks to own and in a practical sense, many companies deliver on these promises. Yet, if these are the claims you believe will differentiate your company among your competitors, you might want to re-think your strategy.

Price, quality and customer service are, without question, the most typically promoted attributes found in nearly every marketplace today. Are these white-noise promises believable or influential? Do your prospects take contentions like these at face value or are your claims about price, quality and service considered hype? After all, what right-minded business would promote high prices, lousy products and poor customer service? Given these obvious truths, why then would you choose marketing's lowest common denominators to characterize your firm and its offerings?

Influential marketing seldom rises from the claims your competitors lay hold of too. And you can almost bet your competitors claim ownership to price, quality and service. Your industry may promote other generic, trade-specific claims too: Fast turnaround, value, longevity in business and leadership. All trades have identifiable assertions that seem attractive and to which companies gravitate as a group. The problem for most companies who adopt these purported distinctions is simple: Generic claims are not compelling. Even worse, your industry's common claims do little to differentiate you from anyone else.

Be Thankful for Boring

For some companies, this common approach to marketing is not problematic. After all, they might say, "What else needs to be said?" Further, they would add, "It's true: We really offer the best price; our quality is the unsurpassed and our service is outstanding. Why can't we promote these characteristics?"

Answer? True or not, to a prospect that shares no prior relationship with your firm, your claims are not credible. But these assertions are anticipated, thus their inherent weakness.

Lowest denominator claims are not a problem as long as your company is not part of the group making them. Be thankful if your competitors present their companies in this manner. For the astute marketer, the vanilla clamor of your industry's contenders on common and not-too-influential points is an opportunity waiting to be seized.

To locate originality in your industry, you will want to survey your competitors to understand the kinds of messaging your audience experiences each day. In addition to price, quality and service, what are your competitors telling their (and your) prospects? No doubt, you will observe that prospective customers see and hear a cluster of claims that sound alike. Call this your market's threshold of invisibility. Better yet, call it noise. It is predictable and you can be sure your prospects tune it out.

Once you have determined the common content of your industry's marketing noise, your next step is simple: Don't be a part of it. Instead, look for something distinct and problematic in your prospective customer's daily

routine. Determine what your prospects do not like among industry's your offerings. Pick one thing and fix it. Then, fix your messaging on it. Your prospects will find your departure from blah-blah-blah refreshing.

Don't focus your message on the your fix alone, however. Be compassionate and express your empathy for your prospects' soon-to-be rectified headache. Communicate your sincerity by speaking with your prospect in their terms, from their vantage point. Address the benefits of your solution in the second person: Do not use first person pronouns or similar references to your company in your solution's description. From a prospect's vantage point, your solution is not about you – it's about them. Frame your message around the bigger picture of your offering's potential significance. What does your fix mean in the larger scope of your prospect's daily agenda?

For example, as the result of a relationship with your company, can your prospect leave work early so that there is more time to spend with family? Is there some burden you lift from your prospect's shoulders so that something once dreaded is now a thing-of-the-past? How is your prospect's life better because of your deliverables?

You Want it When?

Think back twenty-five years to a time when you and I waited a week or more for our Sears & Roebuck catalog order to arrive. Having found that perfect valance for the kitchen or Craftsman's latest drill motor, you picked up the phone, called the toll-free number and placed the order. "When will it arrive?" you asked. The voice on the other end of the phone said, "about a week or so." To this you responded, "that's great." Everyone understood that package delivery took time. After all, it was at the mercy of the postal service or the men in brown, so without question, we waited patiently.

Then, Fred Smith came along and informed us that pack-

ages could be delivered, from one side of our nation to the other, just a day after we asked for them. Who'd a thought, but what a change! Fred recognized that there was something everyone wanted – speedy package delivery – yet, as consumers, it remained out of our reach. Fred simply figured out how to place this common want within our reach. Then, he raised our expectations and made everyone's life better by giving us Federal Express.

Wherever possible, this kind of positioning should be your company's primary goal. No, you do not have to change our cultural paradigm as part of the process. It is enough to place something perceived to be out of reach within reach of your prospect. All that remains is to market the significance of this new potential.

The Impact of Potential Significance

Volvo is example of a company that markets to potential significance. Like many cars, Volvo's lineup offers moderately economical transportation coupled with a certain measure of luxury. But Volvo ignores its leather seats, sunroofs and other lavish attributes in its marketing. Volvo chooses not to compete for the same chunk of mind-share as do Mercedes Benz and BMW. Instead, Volvo owns another piece of the consumer's mind – safety. Sure, Mercedes and BMW mention safety in their dialogues, but is safety the characteristic you mentally affix to these companies? Probably not. BMW is the Ultimate Driving Machine. Mercedes is the Ultimate Luxury Car. But Volvo... Volvo is a safe car. If you are raising a family, especially if you have small children and if safety is your top concern, Volvo is probably near the top of your list of choices. Volvo owns our perception of safety.

You Can't Own What Can't be Owned

Look at your firm. What mental real estate does your company own among your prospects? Can you really

own the concept of best customer service? Maybe, but your competitors do not think so. That is what they sell too.

Can your company own unparalleled quality? Again, your competitors will argue otherwise. From their vantage point, their offering is obviously better. Just pick up their ads or look at their web sites and you will see. Besides, what does your definition of quality mean anyway? On my recent visit to a renowned web site – the foremost digest on the Six Sigma methodology for quality, as many as half the links on its home page didn't work. Among the hiccups, a feature article – a story about Six Sigma's benefits in the service-sector – failed to navigate correctly. The site's broken links sporting red X's did not bode well for the Six Sigma methodology nor did it speak well for the feature article's credibility.

Then there is price. If you want to sell competitive pricing remember, cheap is not an attribute. If it were, McDonald's would own it, yet they don't want it. Instead, by virtue of longevity and its culturally embedded tenure, The Golden Arches own value. Even if your prospects are looking for the best price, they will not buy if they believe that low price equates to inferior or sacrifice. Moreover, companies that produce inferior offerings are not market leaders. They are just cheap and consumers know this. Which brings us back to my point: Price, quality and service are ineffective marketing cornerstones. Use them as the impetus of your marketing strategy at your own risk.

Get Off the Baseline

This means that your company must look toward your prospect and beyond your competitors for a market position that has teeth. Will you find it, ready-to-use among your industry's white noise? Probably not. But you will find something among your competition that is almost as useful, something I alluded to just a moment ago. Let's

call it your industry's baseline messaging – its ambient noise. Hopefully, your competitors are all about this.

Baseline messaging is merely a summary of claims your competitors now use to promote their wares. It is a place in your prospects' mind where average begins. Why is this important? Because baseline messaging is the point at which your prospects go numb. Their eyes glaze over and they can't help it. It is a conditioned response. And if you don't elevate your position above the baseline, guess what: You and all that your company represents are invisible - just like every other company on the baseline.

But, if you look beyond your products and services to focus your message on potential significance, you are better equipped to reach your prospects with a meaningful message. What if your competitors already speak to the most obvious needs? In a seasoned market, they probably do. Find other needs and other means of touching your audience. Human nature is layered and complex. There are always needs that remain un-answered and hopes that go unfulfilled. Dig them out. Then, share your compassion for your prospects' anguish and deliver what they thought they could not have. You will not find a better method of converting your prospects into paying customers.

Apple did just this with its iTunes Music Store. Following the demise of the infamous Napster, music fans seeking online access to popular music were left in a vacuum. As an avid music buff – one with an eye always on the horizon – Apple's CEO, Steve Jobs, took this to heart.

The principle problem with online music access is that of balancing royalties for artists and record companies while controlling distribution. Record companies flattened Napster because its referral service illegitimately offered downloaded music without charge and compromised this principle.

Apple's arrangement with the industry's five major music companies – Universal, Warner, Sony, EMI and BMG – stands in stark contrast to Napster and has transformed the recording industry's music distribution model. Apple's solution is simple and elegant: After a free 30-second preview of one or more of the site's millions of titles, consumers can legally purchase individual tracks or complete CDs with the click of a mouse. Music fans can use the tunes just about anyway they choose. This is precisely what consumer's want. During its first week of operation, the iTunes Music Store sold over a million titles. Today, individual downloads have exceeded 4-billion songs making the iTunes Store the world's #2 music retailer, exceeded only by WalMart.

Does it require a Steve Jobs to transform your industry? Not at all. You, as much as your competitors, well understand the obvious motivations of your constituents. And you can easily know what is missing on their lists of would-haves if you're willing to turn up the volume and listen. Apple's iTunes solution was one of gap closing. Where do your prospects see a gap? Surely, it is not rooted in price, quality and service. Look for it elsewhere. Your customers will think of it as music to their ears.

Finding Your Voice

If developing new customer relationships is the yardstick by which you measure your marketing success, anything less than many new buyers probably corresponds to a weakness in elevating your case. Your message still may be part of the noise. Your company still sits on the baseline and it is time to get off it. Here are a few suggestions that may help:

FIRST: Understand your audience's motivations. What do they see as potentially significant among the offerings in your industry and what is missing? How would your prospects define a breakaway company or an extraordinary solution in the context of their hopes and your

trade? You already know it's a promise that won't be rooted in price, quality and service, so don't bother with such common and ineffective messaging. Let your competitors try to own these.

SECOND: Get familiar with your competition. The first step in establishing your ideal market position is to know what is out of bounds. That is the place where every competitor is now or has been before – this is your industry's threshold of invisibility.

Where can you find this threshold? Perhaps the best place to look is found in your competitors' brochures, trade ads and other collateral. Go to their web sites. Take two or three examples of each competitor's promotional materials and compare them with other competitor's materials. Is the messaging similar? You will probably find the same claims routinely presented by every competitor. Highlight them. As you review your competitors' materials, can you exchange one company's name and logo from its brochure and place it on a competitive brochure without affecting your understanding of what either company claims to offer? If so, this is a good indication that your industry's baseline message is as pervasive as it is ineffectual. Now you know what not to say.

FINALLY: Avoid being cliché. Forget about pompous claims that describe how long you have been serving your customers. Prospects are seldom impressed. Do not bother with dubious declarations about your company's industry leadership. Don't self-aggrandize. That is, do not tout self-perceived references to superiority over your competitors. Stay away from puffery and adjective-laden descriptions of your company and your offerings. Instead, go for your prospect's heart from the heart and market a relationship with your company in terms of its potential significance. Your competitors, still speaking the invisible language of price, quality and service will not see you coming. But that is okay, your prospects will.