

Effective marketing

Proving one's mettle

In this day and age, one is constantly asked to prove oneself to others. One has to get others to believe in the product or service one is selling, and often in oneself as an individual. Whether it is a marketing campaign, customer presentation, or a job interview, he has to provide believable evidence of his capabilities. A long list of product features, service benefits, or personal accomplishments can hardly say much about the contributions he can make, the outcomes he can help achieve, or the value he can add. This article presents some innovative strategies that can be used to market oneself along with one's product in an effective manner.

Abhay Padgaonkar



An interesting article 'Customer Value Propositions in Business Markets' written by James C Anderson, James A Narus and Wouter van Rossum (*Harvard Business Review*, March 2006) discusses a very commonly used but often misunderstood term called customer value proposition - and more importantly, what makes one persuasive. The authors talk about three different approaches to defining a customer value proposition:

All benefits: This is nothing but a laundry list of all the benefits one can think of for the product or service. This is a lazy man's way because it requires the least amount of work. All one needs to know is one's own market offering. The drawback here is that this is a hit-

and-miss game. What if one claims advantage for features that do not actually provide any benefit? And even if they do, it is not a given fact that they differentiate one's product from the competitor's.

Favourable points of difference: This approach highlights all favourable points of differences relative to the best alternative. It answers the question - why should the client purchase a particular company's offering instead of its competitor's? However the drawback is that it is presumed that the point of difference between that company and its competitor is valuable to the client.

Resonating focus: This, the authors say, should be the gold standard. This is the most difficult, but also the most effective. It is





not enough just to articulate it but requires knowledge of how one's own market offering delivers superior value to customers as compared to the next best alternative. This knowledge is obtained through customer value research to find out 'the few elements that matter most to target customers, demonstrating & documenting the value of this superior performance, and communicating it in a way that conveys a sophisticated understanding of the customer's business priorities.' It can also include a point of parity, but prospective customers must convincingly see the cost savings or value addition they can expect from using a particular offering instead of its competitor's.

Culture and competency

There are two things the person on the other side of the table is trying to find out. One is whether the person's or company's motivational and behavioural profile fits with his or his company's culture or not. Second, if the person or company is competent enough and possesses the specific skills required.

One's education, experience, work history, technical knowledge are all important. Clubbed together, however, they manifest themselves

as 'competencies' or capabilities required to successfully perform the job at hand. It is much more than just knowledge about a given subject matter.

A traditional way of assessing competency was based on theoretical questions, but the trouble with theoretical questions is that they elicit theoretical answers. Besides, they are not verifiable. Smart buyers and interviewers are increasingly looking to assess competencies by asking behavioural or experience-based questions. These questions may begin as "Give me a specific example of a time when you..."

The basic premise behind these questions is that past performance is the best predictor of future performance. Many skills and competencies are transferable as long as the situation is more or less similar. That is why when the US President appoints cabinet members, the nominees have rarely performed that exact job, but have supposedly demonstrated the competencies necessary to succeed. Politics aside, confirmation hearings in the US Senate are designed to verify these assertions about the nominee.

Plain speak

Not necessarily on national television, but one is constantly asked to demonstrate one's competency in many forms - whether it is a performance appraisal, CV, behavioural interview or marketing collateral. Rather than reading the whole litany of accomplishments or benefits, it is far better to weave them in a compelling narrative.

In these situations, it is important not to use jargon that makes the listener's eyes glaze over. After all what do phrases like 'persistent value-added synergy' or 'intuitive disintermediation leverage' mean? Nothing really. They are just random words strung together to impress the reader. George Orwell led a

crusade against dying metaphors, verbal false limbs, pretentious diction and meaningless words. In his well-known essay, *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell demonstrates this abuse of language by translating a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort.

Here is a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes:

"I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."

And here is the same paragraph in 'modern' English, according to George Orwell: *Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.*

This is what Orwell had to say regarding the perils of modern writing, "As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else and making the results presentable by sheer humbug."

'SOAR' with one's stories

Hence, these narratives have to be spoken plainly without jargon, but are most effective when told in the form of a story. Barbara Minto in *The Minto Pyramid Principle* says, "The introduction will always be in the form of a story, ie, it will establish a familiar situation, bring into play a complication that in turn triggers a question, and then answer that question." Minto goes on to say

that, "You need to offer the reader a device that will make it easy for him to push his other thoughts aside and concentrate only on what you are saying. A foolproof device of this sort is the lure of an unfinished story".

The first step is to make a list of the high accomplishments or meaningful points of difference that makes one proud and then follow the S O A R model described below for each:

S - Situation: The situation (briefly) provides the context for the specific accomplishment one wants to talk about. This allows the other party to find out the basic facts about the situation one dealt with and establish an overall context for what one is talking about. The mistake people often make is that they forget that they only need to set the scene and not tell the whole life story!

For example, once we had to deal with a situation where voluntary attrition rates among employees were running as high as 50 per cent. As a result, the morale was low, customer service was poor and hidden costs were sky high. We estimated that the total cost to the business was more than \$ 3 million annually. This was clearly not sustainable.

O - Obstacles: The obstacle describes why the situation was particularly problematic or thorny. It also describes why one's accomplishment deserves even greater kudos. Depending on the situation, particularly a forward-looking scenario, one can also use 'O' for opportunity instead of obstacles.

What made the situation in the example even more difficult was that we were dealing with several call centres across the country with different job markets and leadership styles. To make things worse, the unemployment rate was at a historic low. In essence we were dealing with an employees' market.

A - Actions: The actions describe specific actions one takes to remedy



the situation or capitalise on the opportunity. The actions are only important to the extent they will showcase the competencies in question. One should make sure that one describes the actions with powerful verbs rather than worn-out, boring expressions (Hint: Highlight the word in question in Microsoft Word and press Shift+F7 for fresher synonyms).

Whether it is a marketing campaign, customer presentation, or a job interview, one has to provide believable evidence of one's capabilities

I scrutinised the attrition data using a sophisticated statistical technique. Based on that, I generated profiles of employees who were leaving the company at a much faster rate than the average. After brainstorming the root causes of the attrition with a larger team, we crafted specific action plans in three key areas -

employee selection, engagement and leadership effectiveness. We rolled out these insights in the form of an employee retention workshop with the help of the leadership team on the ground.

R - Results: Just like the proof of the pudding is in eating, the proof of one's accomplishments is in the results. This is where the quantifiable value of one's solution is demonstrated. Make them more powerful by using action verbs. The results need to be believable, justifiable and sustainable.

The result was a dramatic - 40 per cent improvement in employee retention in less than six months. There was an equally dramatic upsurge in customer satisfaction and in quality scores of 10 per cent points. Most importantly, the enhanced retention was responsible for slashing more than \$ 1.5 million in recruitment, training, quality and productivity costs.

Mix 'n' match

The second step is to carefully study the job, project, or assignment one is bidding for. Put oneself in the decision-maker's shoes. Understand the job accountabilities and competencies one thinks

will be required to achieve them. Many-a-times, the job description or request for proposal specifies the necessary competencies required. Sometimes one has to read between the lines to figure out the skills necessary to be successful. Some examples of personal competencies include:

- ❖ Thinking strategically
- ❖ Demonstrating adaptability
- ❖ Planning and organising
- ❖ Driving results
- ❖ Communicating effectively
- ❖ Orchestrating change
- ❖ Fostering teamwork
- ❖ Solving problems
- ❖ Resolving conflicts

The third and final step is to match the SOAR stories that have been constructed to the essential job competencies. Further, a single accomplishment often demonstrates multiple competencies. So, depending on the competency being probed, one can expound on a different facet of the same SOAR story.

It is equally important to use this technique in a forward-looking manner. When one is presented with a new opportunity, one should visualise a SOAR story ahead of time that one will be able to write after its successful completion. This will help one to be selective about the right opportunity and approach it with a clear-cut plan in mind.

Proper preparation

Just because it looks simple it does not mean that

it is easy! As with anything else, only practice can make it perfect. Using the SOAR framework described here, however, one can customise one's accomplishments to the given situation. For a résumé, one will need to condense each individual accomplishment to no more than two or three lines of summary. For a behavioural interview, one will need to identify the competencies and prepare and rehearse the relevant facet of a SOAR story for each. For a marketing collateral, one can prepare a one-page glossy that describes one's accomplishment. If one can top it off with a strong client testimonial then that is the icing on the cake.

Regardless of the situation, proper preparation and practice will almost always prevent poor performance and help one to market oneself effectively.



Abhay Padgaonkar is a US-based management consultant,

author and speaker who is also the president of Innovative Solutions Consulting Llc. He is a two-time winner of 'Excellence in Practice' honour by American Society for Training and Development. He has published popular articles in many reputable print and online publications. Padgaonkar routinely shares his views on today's management challenges with audiences representing various organisations and journalists from many publications.

Email: abhay@pobox.com

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