

In One Sentence, What Makes You Special? — Marketing Social Work

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Social Work Today
Peer Perspectives, June 5, 2019

https://www.socialworktoday.com/news/pp_060519.shtml

As social workers and social service providers, it's easy to forget that we are also marketers. While we don't sell beer, automobiles, or computer games, we do compete in the crowded marketplace of empathy and social justice. Marketing is all about storytelling. To have dreams is one thing; to convey them to others—to have them heard and understood—is something else.

Marketing is not at all antagonistic to the core values of the social work profession, “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, [and] competence” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 1). So, what marketing strategies best ensure that your message really gets heard? How can you better develop and communicate ideas that catch on—that ignite the emotions of a particular audience?

Whether your lifeblood is a grant, an individual contribution, a client base, or an advocacy petition filled with signatures, there are many worthy competitors for all of them, and only so much attention that the public can pay to any one of them. At the height of a big news day, it becomes even easier for your offering to recede into the background. But much as private

sector companies rely on carefully considered brand positions—and brand stories to communicate them—it is critical for those of us in the social work profession do the same.

Your Unique Offering

We live in a surplus economy. This means we must live with the understanding that the consumer, client, or funding source has many choices within a given category. Rosser Reeves, a pioneer in marketing communications, came up with the notion of a “unique selling proposition.” Simply put, it states what is different about a product and why anybody should care. Before you start churning out content as fast as you can ... pause. Ask yourself what makes each piece effective. The answer should be as follows: It's high quality and consistent, and it describes what is different about you or your product.

Time is contracting as quickly as attention spans. So, try this for an exercise: In two sentences, what is the essence of your offering? What is it that you do? No jargon please; only plain language allowed.

More than 40 years ago, two advertising creatives were touring the BMW car factory in Germany. There were preparing to create BMW's first American advertising campaign. The tour stopped in the break room where a poster hanging on the wall caught their eye. They asked for a translation of the text, and their client provided the following: “We come to work every day to build the ultimate driving machine.” The advertising agency's work had been done for them. Can you be that trenchant in describing what you do? Can you articulate exactly who your potential clients really are? How many words are needed to communicate what you're trying to say? What is the fewest number

of words you can use? Now, cut to that number.

How do you position your offering? It is often said in marketing circles that if you stand for everything, you stand for nothing. In trying to be all things to all people, it is easy for any product to lose its unique essence. So, once again, what is special about you?

The Lessons of Apple and FDR

Many years ago, when Apple chose to carve out its niche in the computer space, it did so with the idea that its appeal would be to those who “Think Different” (or at least those who believed that they did). They eschewed a populist appeal with one that elevated their offering to a higher order. Did a highly aspirational positioning leave some potential customers behind? Perhaps. But in many ways that is precisely the point. Positioning is a sacrifice. Most importantly, it should also inform the way you proceed in your business.

Apple could not ask potential customers to think differently and then deliver the same old complexity people were coming to expect from a Windows-based operating system. They had to develop an intuitive user-friendly system that became synonymous with its brand. Everything it offered, from its commercials to its colors to the design of its logo, spoke to a difference in its gestalt. The difference it created between Apple and its competitors was impressive. Apple made its positioning more than a collection of artfully crafted words. In short, they were different, special, and you knew it.

Could the linkage between your talk and your walk be equally resonant? Can you tell your story in a succinct and compelling manner? You need look no further than Franklin Roosevelt, a master marketer in

his own right, for an example. In 1941, at the height of pre-World War II American isolationism, Roosevelt devised a workaround to help arm England and the Allies. However, he wisely knew that without a turn in public sentiment, his proposal would find resistance in Congress. Utilizing classic storytelling principles, he was able to explain the complexities of the Lend-Lease program with a simple metaphor: “If my neighbor’s house was on fire, wouldn’t I certainly lend him my garden hose?” In one phrase, one thought, the promise of the program could be clearly understood by the entire country. So too could its benefits.

Communication Counts

Perhaps in a more just world, the merits of your offering would be the sole criteria of success, and they would simply speak for themselves. However, in the reality of our market-driven existence, employing the marketing principles that can help people understand what is unique and special about your offering can be one of the most important services that you can provide.

The more capable you might be at solving a real problem in the world, the more responsible you must be in communicating and marketing that ability effectively.

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