

DEALING WITH CLIENTS WHO THINK THEY KNOW MARKETING

But Don't --And What They Should Know

There's a wonderful cartoon in which a guy in a business suit is looking over the shoulder of an artist at his canvas. The caption, spoken by the artist, is "I used to dabble a bit in accounting, too."

Then there's the guy who said to me, "If you're smart enough to be a lawyer, then you're smart enough to do your own advertising." To which I replied, "Yes that's true. You're also smart enough to be a nuclear physicist, but it doesn't make you one."

There's the guy who read a book about tightrope walking. He knew everything about tightrope walking -- except how to do it.

The point is that while marketing may not be nuclear physics, it does have its craft, its artistry, its techniques, its experiences, and its history. And if you're not within the realm of all those things and more, you don't know much about marketing. Marketing mythology doesn't count for much.

And it's not just accountants and lawyers who fall prey to the egocentric nonsense that they can do it because, after all, they have graduate degrees. A large number of people in business feel the same way.

Every marketing professional can tell you a story about a client or employer who retained the marketer for the marketer's expertise, and then drowned him or her with useless second guessing. A favorite starts with the words, "My wife says..."

But perhaps the real problem is not the presumption of knowledge where none really exists, it's in the drive to an unwarranted expectation that leaps over a large mound of reality. Every marketer has a story about being hired by a professional who says, "We've been a small firm for 15 years, and now it's time for us to be a big firm. Help us." Followed by a large fee or salary, which, unfortunately, always makes it harder for even the wisest of us to say no.

Too bad, because what usually happens is not only acute second-guessing, but entrenched ideas steeped in marketing mythology. Your marketer says, from the depths of experience, "This is what we have to do," To which the reply is, "But we've never done it that way. Let's do it the way we always have." The tenure of the marketer in that situation is rarely longer than three months, at which point the client goes out to find another marketer, and the cycle is repeated.

The client, truth told, may think he or she wants to be big – but doesn't want to go through the rigors of *getting* big. Don't dislodge the status quo.

What, then, should clients or employers know about what they don't know – in order to really benefit from the knowledgeable, experienced, and thoughtful marketer? A lot, but let's start with...

- Marketing has specific skills that improve with experience. How to understand the

client's market. How to write a program that achieves a marketing objective. How to use the tools of marketing, and how to manage those tools.

- Marketers understand what works and what doesn't. Many years ago I developed an ad campaign for a client who had some ideas of his own that he wanted to try out. OK, I said, let's run your ad, which seemed to be a good one, against my ad, which he didn't like as much as his ad. My ad out-pulled his by 50%. Why? Because he didn't understand the psychology of advertising, which is learned only after long experience. Remember Exxon's "We put a tiger in your tank"? It beat the stuffing out of everybody else in the field. Why? Because the guy who wrote it understood that what sold gas was not just the words, or even the picture. It was the feeling that the strength and power of a tiger became yours when you got behind the wheel. The guy who wrote it (he died just recently) didn't learn how to do that in accounting or law school.
- There is no greater artistry in marketing than in direct mail. Knowing how to capture the reader in the first line of the letter. Knowing how to time a mailing. Knowing how to get the reader to think that the bright idea to buy was the reader's, not the writer's. And that's just a sample of what the professional marketer knows. "Why are we paying this guy so much for direct mail?" an accounting firm partner once asked. "I've been writing letters all my life. I can do it."
- Marketers understand that trying to tell people how to think about the firm doesn't work. That's why you can't say things like, "We put clients first," or "We do high quality work." It may be what you want the reader to think about you, but they're not going to just because you ask them to. More brochures are expensive and useless garbage because they attempt to get readers to believe things that just aren't credible by simply expounding them. Professional marketers know better.
- Good marketers understand the difference between firm objectives and marketing objectives. They're not the same, although you can't have one without the other, as the song goes.
- Ultimately, marketing is an art form that uses skills, techniques and experience to achieve its ends. As we've said, if you want a good marketing program, don't hire a mechanic, hire an artist.

As a professional, you should have some inkling about how expensive it is to hire marketers whose work you don't understand or appreciate, only to have a frustrating parting of the ways. It's even worse when you have a strong feeling that marketing is something you have to do in this competitive environment, but aren't quite sure about how to hire, much less understand and live with, that peculiar breed of professional services marketers.

And now a word to clients and partners who think they know marketing. Unless you're that rare bird who's had some successful experience because you have some kind of inborn talent for marketing – and there are some of you like that – you don't know beans. And you won't know beans until they start teaching marketing in law or accounting schools, which is long overdue. Or until you've had long experience with a terrific marketer on your staff. But if you don't have a natural affinity for it, there are things you should know that will result in your competing successfully in this wildly competitive market. Or until you hire marketers who know their stuff, and can teach you what you should know.

You should know, first, that the mechanics of marketing -- the media relations and the writing and the direct mail and seminars and such – are not marketing. Marketing, in the final analysis, is an art form. The mechanics and tools are not the art. And as I've often said, when you're hiring a marketer, don't look for a mechanic – look for an artist.

OK, then, how do you hire an artist to do your marketing? Even before you talk to your first interviewee, or read your first resume, you need to know this...

- Understand and respect the skills of marketing. You can understand a lot, if you don't try to gum it up with trying to do what you're not trained to do.
- Don't take seriously the opinions of non-marketers about technical marketing matters. They're not likely to know. Some of the best articles, brochures, and other written marketing material wouldn't pass muster for a 7th grade grammar teacher. But know that marketing writing isn't designed for grammar teachers. It's designed to communicate ideas clearly and persuasively, with credibility and passion. Writing ain't wordsmithing, any more than fine cabinet making isn't just hammering and sawing. It's communication of ideas. I couldn't begin to tell you how much of what I write drives 7th grade teachers and English majors nuts. But not, apparently, my many thousands of readers, nor the editors of the publications that print my stuff. Nor, thank goodness, my consulting clients.
- At the same time, know the difference between promotional activities, such as activities that enhance name recognition and reputation, and actually getting clients to build a practice. The difference is strategy, and a range of practice development activities that get you in front of prospects. Promotional activities are important, but won't do much to get you clients if you don't follow up with practice development activities.
- Either trust your marketer's judgment, or get a marketer you do trust. No, your wife, who has a degree in English and did a fine job of raising your children, can't write your brochure. She doesn't know how. And the consensus of your partners about marketing copy is about as useful as your marketing team's consensus about an audit or a brief.
- Read resumes carefully, and know (or find out) the differences between different kinds of marketing professionals. In the early days following *Bates*, one Big Eight accounting firm hired its first marketing director from an ad agency. But the guy had been in ad *traffic*, and knew nothing about professional firm marketing, or how to write press releases that someone would publish, or a brochure. "But he worked for a major ad agency," was the excuse.
- Make sure that both you and your prospective marketing hire both understand the same things about your marketing objectives, and that both of your objectives are realistic.
- Make sure you both understand what you're willing to do – or not do – to achieve marketing success. Most marketing activities, particularly as prescribed by good marketers, might not be within your experience. But they should be within your marketer's experience. Again, either trust your marketer or get a new one.
- Listen to what your marketer has to say. Listen carefully. If you can't live with what's being said, either don't hire that person, or forget about marketing. You'll waste your money and the marketer's time.
- If you don't know how to hire a marketer – and if you've never worked with one before, why should you? – then learn. There are good books. There are articles. There is, of course, *The Marcus Letter* and other good marketing blogs and web sites. You can speak to marketing professionals in other firms that have successful marketing programs. There are the marketer's associations – Legal Marketing Association(LMA) for law firm marketers, Association of Accounting Marketers (AAM) for accounting marketers.
- It sometimes helps to judge a prospective marketer's experience by the questions he or she asks you in an interview. A good marketer should ask...
 - How many practice areas do you serve?
 - Which are your strongest practices? Which are your weakest?

- What are the industries you're strongest in, and which are your weakest?
- Do you use client service teams? How many? Which practices? How are they organized and how are they monitored?
- Will I be able to regularly attend practice group meetings?
- Is there a marketing committee? How often does it meet?
- To whom will I report?
- How many partners are sympathetic to marketing and supportive of the marketing operation?
- How strong are your cross-selling activities? (This will tell whether the partners cooperate with one another, or whether the firm is a collection of individuals who think of themselves first and the firm second.)
- How large is the marketing department?
- How large is the marketing budget?
- How will marketing success or failure be judged?

Any marketing applicant who doesn't ask these questions – or questions like these – is going to be gone in 18 months or less. Don't waste your time or the applicant's time.

At the same time, it helps to hire the best marketers if you consider ...

- Whether the applicant asks the foregoing questions.
- The resume is only the tip of the iceberg. If it merely lists jobs, ask what responsibilities each job actually entailed, how they did it, and with what success.
- Get an assessment of how much they actually know about your profession. It may or may not be much, but the longer the experience the greater the knowledge.
- Successful marketing requires a great many different skills – writing for many different kinds of media, from brochures to press releases; networking; strategy; media relations; planning and running seminars; list management; and many more. Ask which skills the interviewee has, and in which he or she is the strongest. Don't ask about weaknesses and expect a straight answer.

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Thinking in terms of the foregoing, and not what you think you know about marketing but probably don't, will more likely get you an effective marketing operation – and knowledgeable marketers as well.

Why do some firms succeed and grow, empowered by great marketers and marketing programs,

and others don't? Start from the beginning of this article and read it through again.

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Bruce W. Marcus is a Connecticut-based consultant in marketing and strategic planning for professional firms, the editor of THE MARCUS LETTER ON PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKETING, (www.marcusletter.com) and the co-author of CLIENT AT THE CORE (John Wiley & Sons, 2004) . His Email address is marcus@marcusletter.com. © Bruce W. Marcus. All rights reserved.