

DEVELOPING ESSENTIAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE IMAGE MANAGEMENT.

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- Developing an effective brand strategy to reflect the direction and positioning of your firm
- Assessing what communication strategies are required across the enterprise
- Developing an effective communication strategy to deliver information about the firm to existing and potential clients
- Examining effective methods of disseminating vital information about the firm to the media and beyond.

The essential proposition.

My proposition is that, in terms of a business in the professional services sector, the development of essential communication skills for effective image management relates as much to the behaviour which demonstrates the brand as well as to the visual, verbal and written material about the business. Not only does everyone within the organisation have to be committed to the consistent application of a brand in material for external distribution in order for this brand to be effective and clearly understood in the marketplace, but more importantly an image or brand only has lasting value if it is consistently demonstrated as well.

Going back to the beginning.

The first aspect we need to consider is developing an effective brand strategy to reflect the direction and positioning of your business. Although the development of this direction and positioning is not primarily the focus of this article, it is so critical to the success of any communication strategy and image management that some mention must be made of this process. It involves the identification of the unique strengths of your business, the aspects which differentiate it from others occupying the same marketplace, and identification of the target market which needs what your business has to offer. It also involves the implementation of a strategy, which will move the business further in that direction, fine tuning your offering as you develop in order to be able to better serve existing and potential clients. Once these steps have been undertaken, it is then possible to develop key messages and develop the visual representation of these messages, both of which can be used in any written and verbal external communication. It is also the time to begin to plan how the brand will be effectively and consistently demonstrated.

A brand cannot be developed without this process because your brand becomes the tangible representation of your essential differentiation, expressed through a variety of ways, which must be meaningful for your existing and potential client group. You need to achieve clarity about the essential ingredients of this differentiation. Equally important is the step to check this brand and differentiation against the key issues of existing and potential clients, and against the positioning of near competitors. Does your key differentiation match what your existing and potential clients say they want and are you sure you are the only one offering this particular aspect in this particular way?

Assessing what communication strategies are required

Having clarified the brand, the next step is to assess what communication strategies are required across the firm to make this brand very tangible.

In the first instance, a brand has to be communicated successfully to provide the purchaser with strong reasons to select one particular provider rather than another, in the absence of any tangible proof that the purchase will be of a satisfactory nature. Research all around the world proves that in this situation of intangibility, purchasers will use a number of ways to test the professionalism and trustworthiness of a potential service provider as well as taking in the messages being presented by visual, printed and on line marketing material. These include firstly checking with trusted colleagues, friends or relatives that the brand is consistent and congruent with the experiences these referrers may have had, secondly assessing how they feel about the behaviour of the provider during the first face to face interactions, and thirdly consciously or unconsciously picking up clues about the provider from the environment in which the business operates. But being selected is only the first step. It is then important to have communication strategies which assist in client retention and encourage repeat business.

We can therefore say that in the situation of professional services firms, the assessment of the required communication strategies becomes an assessment how to capitalize on every opportunity one has to interact with existing and potential clients. During each of these opportunities, one is listening and then communicating in a way, which is meaningful for the client. Yes, you are communicating the key messages of your brand but giving them relevance and meaning in terms of the issues facing your client. So communication strategies must include listening as well as actively demonstrating the behaviour, which is congruent with the brand messages.

Here is an overview of the various opportunities you may have. The assessment process focuses on the potential offered by each of these.

Opportunity one – during the process of creating awareness.

As one purchaser of professional services said to me recently, “It is important for providers of services to get on my radar screen”. But it is not enough to just create awareness of the features of what you do but you must also achieve a clear understanding by your target group about what makes you different and worth selecting.

Opportunity two – the initial face-to-face interaction.

During this interaction, you build rapport and begin to learn about the client's issues so that you can match your service offering with the situation in front of the client, showing how you can offer benefit. This is reinforced by testimonials and references from others who have experienced your service. Your potential client will usually make a point of seeking these whether you provide them or not.

The face-to-face encounters make important contributions to the building of the relationship. This is necessary if a client is to be able to judge that you know what you are talking about, and therefore can trust that you are capable and able to deliver, but also to decide that you are someone with whom they want to deal. Asking the opinions of trusted friends or colleagues is one way of minimizing the risk that you may not deliver. However the client is the only one who can assess that the way you have communicated about yourself, and interacted with them, is acceptable to them.

Opportunity three – doing the first piece of work.

Being able to gain and do a piece of work, even if small, is a chance to demonstrate skill and your brand, and deliver outcomes leading to other work. Doing a piece of work is a communication exercise. Communication is achieved not only through the work you do but through the way you do it and through the supporting aspects – were there regular progress reports, are the invoices clear with no surprises, is feedback regarding satisfaction sought and so on?

Opportunity four – continuing to build the relationship.

Ongoing work assists you to continue to build the relationship and demonstrate your brand differentiation in as many different ways as possible. What is being said in your printed or online communication must now be supported by your behaviour. The way you continue to build the relationship through the work undertaken, social occasions, acknowledgements (remembering the client's important anniversaries and accomplishments) must be consistent with the type of firm your brand says you are.

Opportunity five – delivering exceptional service.

If you are able to give such an exceptional level of service, as well as clear messages about your values, and what you regard as important, the client becomes your word of mouth communicator ready to pass on your key differentiation to anyone who asks. At the same time, because you know your client better, you are able to find opportunities to add value by giving the right information at the right time. Never fall into the trap of taking good existing clients for granted.

Development of an effective communication strategy

Developing an effective communication strategy to deliver information about the firm and its differentiation is about making the most of all these opportunities.

Shouldice Hospital in Toronto provides us with one of my favourite examples of a business which has skillfully developed a brand and effective communication strategy, demonstrated this throughout the organization in all interactions with clients, thereby meeting their expectations. This hospital has specialized to a very high degree and identified one target market. It only does one particular type of hernia operation and only for people who are healthy in every other respect. This enables all aspects of the business, including the operation, recovery procedures, environment and use of staffing, to be shaped into a coherent brand. Guests are welcomed into a country club like setting with good food and the opportunity to interact with others who are there for the same affliction. On arrival they are told what to expect at each stage of their treatment.

The surgeons, who have clocked up as many as 30,000 operations each, have developed a high degree of expertise, not only with regard to the surgical procedures, but also with regard to the recovery process. It has been found that the more exercise following the operation the faster the recovery so this exercise begins with patients being required to get up from the operating table and walk to the door of the operating room with their surgeon. After a couple of hours rest, they are told to start exercising. Staff are trained to assist during this recovery period and all are pressed into service as counselors, encouraging the undertaking of this exercise, even if their other duties are surgery, or administration, or housekeeping and so on.

Because of the different way in which this particular operation is offered, the quick recovery period, the environment, which is unlike a usual hospital, and the success rate which is 12 times better than the average success rate of any other hospital in North America, and a third of the normal cost in spite of the club like environment, people are willing to travel long distances to purchase this service – around 8,000 people a year.

Disseminating information to the media

Effective methods for disseminating vital information about the firm to the media have to be shaped by the same considerations as shape any other external communication. The objective is to continue to build brand or image through this process.

First of all, it is important to select the media, which is appropriate for the group of existing clients and prospective clients you wish to reach. Become aware of the type of article or news item these different media use. Select appropriate journalists and get to know them and how to assist them in their job. Forward background information, commentary on changes of legislation or new developments. Send information on which members of your firm they can contact in different situations and make sure these people will respond quickly. Wherever possible, select items which demonstrate your particular capability and brand.

Create opportunities by taking a relevant news item and arrange for one of your specialists to write some interesting pros and cons or background material, or undertake

some proprietary research. This latter provides an opportunity to talk authoritatively about some new information, such as this category and number of individuals in such and such an industry say this or that. It also gives you the opportunity to publish and distribute the information yourself to a targeted audience.

Develop a media programme using these strategies so that you are consistently in touch and forwarding relevant and news worthy information because over time some of this material will be used by the media. Having your people regularly quoted in relation to different issues is very worthwhile profiling. Just as worthwhile is the regular forwarding of summarized and relevant information to selected clients and targets. This may be very brief encouraging people to come to your website for more details but the key is relevant information in a form which can be quickly used by busy people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the essential steps to developing strategic communication skills for effective image management are to

1. Develop an effective brand or image, which reflects the differentiation of your firm and has relevance for your target market, in the first instance.
2. Identify the opportunities to communicate this brand, along with essential information about your firm, through visual, verbal and written material and by behaviour during every interaction with existing and prospective clients. This will ensure that the client expectations, shaped by the communication, will be met.
3. Develop an integrated and comprehensive strategy using all these elements and make sure any media campaign reflects this.
4. Achieve commitment to the consistent implementation of this strategy over a substantial period of time so that satisfied clients appreciate the unique value you offer and willingly communicate this to others on an ongoing basis. For a professional services firm, there is nothing more powerful than positive word of mouth advertising.

Overall, be so clear and articulate about your brand and differentiation that people can understand it, experience it and then they will be motivated to continue the communication process for you.