



The Four Myths of Professional Services Marketing

by Michael W. McLaughlin

For decades, professional service providers—including consultants, accountants, lawyers and others—were reluctant marketers. They thrived in a cozy world where networks of personal relationships and word-of-mouth brought them enough new clients to grow a profitable business. Those days aren't gone, but they're fading fast.

For many services buyers, personal relationships are still the driver of purchase decisions, but the cracks in that buying model are now apparent.

In a recent study of client buying behavior, analysts at Raintoday.com found that more than half of professional service purchasers are open to switching service providers. Golf, theatre tickets and other perks are still part of the business development game for many. But even those tactics are running out of gas.

To compete for and win the most profitable work, professional service providers must rethink familiar marketing practices and focus their marketing strategies on the issues that really matter to clients.

Begin that shift in your marketing mindset by challenging four common myths.

Myth 1: Great work speaks for itself

Some believe that delivering outstanding results in the present is the foundation of a successful marketing strategy. That is, if you do great work, your client will hire you when new needs arise and will send you valuable referrals for new business. That logic seems reasonable, but don't bet your business on it.

It's true that flawless delivery is essential for long-term success. It's not likely that a professional service firm would survive a string of service failures. But you can't assume in today's business environment that word of your great performance will travel through your client's organization—and beyond that to others—without sustained effort on your part.

To get the word out, you need client-level communication plans for your current clients, and you need to integrate the details of the success you have helped clients achieve into your overall marketing plan.

Myth 2: A Web site is just a promotional tool

Even with a referral in hand, the majority of prospective clients head straight to your Web site before they call you. Often, that Web site visit is the prospective client's first step in a business relationship with you.

With a virtual handshake, your site has the power to create a positive first impression that can mean the difference between getting a follow-up call from the client and losing that opportunity.

Your Web site should be a critical part of your strategy to initiate and sustain relationships with clients, instead of just a promotional tool. Nothing substitutes for the power of personal interaction with clients, but your Web site can and should re-enforce your commitment to clients.

Professional service firms differ from one another in many ways, including size, scope of services, culture, client management philosophies and people. Yet, to clients, their Web sites make professional service firms look like clones of one another.

Look at the Web sites of a handful of firms, and you'll find similar, hollow marketing messages, such as these:

"Our passion is providing insights to small businesses which lead you and your organization to financial well-being."

"We have built our firm with the resources and support to help meet your long and short-term financial goals."

Clients buy services from people they believe in. Meaningless claims like those won't get the job done.

Your Web site should help you gain clients' trust. How? Build your site's content around specific client problems and issues, not your qualifications or generic mission statements. Give clients what they're looking for—a way to see that your firm understands exactly what they need.

Myth 3: You need to find the client's pain

Sales trainers often advise finding a client's "pain" as the first step to sales success. We're advised to ask prospective clients questions like What keeps you awake at night? What are your pain points? And, If you had a magic wand, what problem would you make disappear?

Not only do such questions make a client's eyes cross, they also expose two fatal flaws. First, they proclaim that you are fishing for answers rather than pursuing a substantive discussion; at the very least, they demonstrate a lack of preparation.

And, second, not all clients are looking for "pain" remedies. Sure, business advisors sort out tough problems for clients, but that doesn't mean they're painful. Maybe clients want to raise the bar on overall company performance, pursue a new business opportunity or improve some aspect of the business. The help you provide doesn't have to alleviate pain.

Myth 4: It's safe to follow the leader

Most professional service marketing follows a predictable strategy—a series of "safe" marketing decisions based on what's being done by others.

The result is me-too marketing that does little to differentiate you from competing firms. Marketing expert Seth Godin warns that "professional service marketing is certainly among the 'safest' I've ever seen. Because it appears to take no risks, it's actually quite risky."

Of course, there is value in learning from the success of others. Many firms face similar marketing challenges, so using the ideas of those who share your plight may seem like a good way to accelerate the development of your marketing strategy.

Unfortunately, relying on the marketing programs of others blurs the subtle differences between professional service firms, leading to a client perception that very different firms have the same characteristics.

Too often, professional service firms do just that—recycle the ideas of others. Review how 25 firms differentiate themselves, and you'll find marketing material that emphasizes attributes like quality service, best price, methodologies or service responsiveness. Because these differentiators are so overused, they've lost their strength.

Clients view such claims as table stakes—the minimum needed to get in the game, but not enough to win. You don't have to stop using those market differentiators completely. But lead your marketing communication with something more client-focused, such as your detailed understanding of the client's problem followed by how you helped others in a similar situation.

No More Myths

The marketing of professional services is evolving, with many new ways to attract and retain clients. Some marketing strategies have lost their magic, while others are emerging as winners.

One marketing truth won't change: Clients will continue to buy from trustworthy and competent people who can demonstrate, beyond a reasonable doubt, that they can produce the results they promise.

Demonstrate that to the market and you'll have clients lined up to work with you.

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