

# AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

California Marketing Update - Newsletter of the Southern California Chapter, October 1998

## Differentiation In Marketing Professional Services

BY LAWRENCE M. KOHN AND ROBERT N. KOHN

The marketing of professional services, such as attorneys and CPAs, presents a variety of challenges. One of the most significant is differentiation.

To the outside world, professionals are clones. Unlike sales-people who are trained to understand how their product or service is different than the competition, professionals are trained to think alike. They study the same laws. They learn how to follow the same rules and pass the same state exams. They focus on compliance with the same procedures. They often dress the same, speak the same language as their peers and they manage their firms with the same styles.

Inevitably, they all market the same way. They want the same brochures. They write the same newsletters - they even purchase canned newsletters which are distributed by other firms. They publish the same articles. They present the same speeches. They go out of their way to conform to an appropriate norm and, as a result, are successful in appearing exactly the same as their competitors.

Professionals may see significant differences among themselves in the areas of technical skills, knowledge or experience. But, often their prospects are not sophisticated enough to appreciate these differences. Therefore, to help them differentiate themselves, marketers must help professionals understand the differences that are meaningful to prospects.

### 1. SERVICE

One of the areas professionals can be differentiated is in the quality of service. While most professionals **say** they offer quality service, few professionals actually **analyze** the quality of their service. And as a result, many professionals offer poor service. They do not return phone calls promptly, or their staff is rude to clients, or bills are not sent out in a timely fashion. If you want to help your clients differentiate their service, begin by helping them to analyze their procedures, policies and attitudes.

The next step is to teach them how to **prove** that they offer quality service. The way to prove quality service is for them to communicate their rules of doing business. For example, if a professional wants to

communicate a policy of prompt response, he could say that his rule is to "Return all calls by 5:00 p.m."

### 2. PERSONALITY

An important principle of marketing professional services is that new business is developed as a result of quality relationships. Therefore, one of the most important distinguishing features for professionals is personality. It is qualities such as loyalty, honesty, reasonableness, empathy, trustworthiness, creativity and enthusiasm which create and maintain client relationships.

Yet, these are difficult qualities to reveal. For example, simply stating that they are creative may seem like bragging, or have little meaning unless they can support it. Professionals must find indirect methods of

**"Professionals go out of their way to conform to an appropriate norm and, as a result, are successful in appearing exactly the same as their competitors"**

communicating that they possess these positive qualities.

One way of indirectly revealing personality traits is by giving examples or telling stories in which these qualities were operative. Some of our clients call these stories, "War Stories," because they are often depicted in environments of conflict.

If you want to help your clients demonstrate that they are creative, they could share a personal experience where they faced a significant challenge, but came up with a creative solution. Or, instead of simply stating that they are loyal, they could tell a story about a personal experience in which they stuck with a client through difficult times.

They can also communicate personal qualities through their deeds. For example, if they want to communicate that they are enthusiastic, then they should **speak with enthusiasm**. So many professionals we know have a **self-image** of being enthusiastic, but go around moping and complaining.

If they want to demonstrate that they are trustworthy, then they need to **keep their commitments**. If they say they will do something by a certain date, they should make sure it really gets done. It's amazing how many professionals do not live up to their commitments. And, the truth is that once

they lose someone's trust, it is difficult, if not impossible to regain it.

### 3. INTERESTS

Another technique which differentiates professionals is communication about their interests. Professionals often feel uncomfortable disclosing their personal interests with prospects, and yet, these are some of the most significant factors in building relationships. One famous attorney in Los Angeles, is an incredible baseball fan. His office is plastered with memorabilia. He has lots of season tickets and frequently takes his clients and prospects. He even goes to summer baseball camp. In addition to his legal skills, he has set himself apart as an unusual baseball fan. While his hobby has brought him great personal enjoyment, it also has produced notoriety in the press and top-of-mind awareness among his targets.

In addition to communicating personal interests, it is also meaningful to identify areas of shared interests. Often, prospects hire someone simply because they support the same causes or charities, or because they have similar hobbies, or because they are involved with the same activities such as their children's soccer team.

### 4. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A fourth technique for differentiating professionals is to communicate personal accomplishments. This is essentially the process of verbalizing their biography. What speeches have they given? What articles have they published? What organizations do they support? It is the fact that they speak, or write or are a leader in their professional communities that differentiates them from the competition and positions them as authorities in their fields.

Although they may have written biographies, in many cases these will not be read by prospects. Whenever possible, they should integrate their biographical information into their dialogue with prospects.

Clearly, each professional is different. But, their desire to meet the standards and image of their profession has resulted in a gray mass of equals. As a marketer, you can help professionals differentiate themselves and significantly enhance their marketability and profitability.

*Lawrence M. Kohn and Robert N. Kohn are principals in Kohn Communications, A West Los Angeles Based firm which helps professionals learn how to market more effectively. They can be reached at (310)652-1442.*