

Lessons for Professional Services Firms: Communicating – It's All About You

Super Bowl Sunday is just days away. The event brings out two distinct types of participants: those who are interested in the biggest football game of the year, and those more interested in the marquee commercials. For this year's game, CBS set the price at \$5.1–\$5.3 million per 30-second ad, and even before we knew which teams would be playing, nearly all of the ad space was sold out.

As of January 23, 2019, confirmed advertisers included Anheuser-Busch InBev, Audi, Avocados from Mexico, Bubly, Bumble, Colgate, Doritos, Hyundai, Kia, M&M, Mercedes-Benz, National Football League, Olay, Pepsi, Planters, Pringles, SimpliSafe, Toyota, TurboTax, Turkish Airlines, Verizon, Walt Disney and WeatherTech. Did you notice the connection between all the companies on this list? All are products that appeal to consumers.

We've all seen plenty of brands use marketing and brand differentiation, but what happens when your product is not a "thing" but a "person"? This is the challenge faced by professional services marketers.

Communicating in the professional services sector is unique. Accountants, lawyers, financial professionals, doctors and dentists all face similar challenges. This discussion focuses primarily on the accounting and legal professions.

The differentiators between two organizations or professionals are often intangible, such as ideas and creativity, but important factors like experience, education and service can be shown.

Years ago, you would find professionals networking together and business owners attending their local Rotary Club lunch meetings. Purchasing a country or social club membership was another way to network and mingle with potential clients and referral sources. Today, in-person networking is no longer enough. With increased competition, reputational challenges, and unique ethical and legal constraints, communicators in the professional services sector have to get creative to set themselves apart.

When the differentiators are intangible ...

For those in the professional services sector, the key is to focus on what clients want and then articulate how you can address their needs.

The question is, what do clients want?



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They want you to solve their problems

It doesn't matter what area of professional services you practice in; clients hire you because they have a problem and need your help with finding a solution. Today, there is so much do-it-yourself information available to supposedly help potential clients with their legal and accounting issues. What you, the professional, bring to the table is context and experience. You can also help your client better understand how existing and proposed regulations will affect their particular situations.

They want to know you'll call them back

You have undoubtedly heard the saying that client service means "make each client feel like they are your only client." Let's be honest: Your clients know that they are not your only client, but they want to know you are accessible when they need you. And they want to know if they hire you, that they will work with *you* – and not another, possibly less-experienced provider.

Despite our always-on society, no client really expects you to return their call day or night unless perhaps you practice in criminal law, but most clients do want to know how long they should expect to wait for a reply. For most professionals, the expectation is that an email or call will be returned within 24 hours on a weekday. (I once worked with an attorney whose standard reply time was 20 minutes. This showed that he expected the same of me, so I made a point of replying to his emails as quickly as possible.)

They want a business partner

Take the time to learn about your clients' industries and their businesses. Industry-specific knowledge assures clients that in addition to knowing your area of practice, you understand how this applies to their business specifically. You can't offer your best counsel if you don't understand the challenges your clients face. The professional who understands her clients' business needs is more likely to be the first call when they need help. To be that call, don't just focus on professional development in your own field; make sure you are reading material in your clients' industry areas as well. Attend their conferences. Know what innovations and shake-ups are on the horizon.

Reputation is everything

In the professional services sector, clients are "buying" you. You are the product. At the most basic level, clients need to know they can trust you, so firms and professionals have to [protect their reputations](#) at all costs. What does this mean? Your reputation is based on your values, ethics and history of consistently doing the right thing – even if it's not the easy road. Make sure your website, postings and actions all support that reputation.

Think about everything that is put out into the world today. Social media has tripped up more than a few professionals who thought their postings were private. Remember that in today's environment, you don't have a separate professional and a personal presence; there is only one you. Anything you post online privately or publicly is discoverable, so don't believe the privacy settings of social networks.

Not managing your reputation can mean the difference between getting hired or not. While your client contact might have worked with you for years and knows the “real” you, your digital footprint is still out there for other stakeholders to see. The client contact who hired you has to be able to defend that choice to the firm’s or company’s stakeholders. Don’t make it hard to do.

This is part one of a two-part series dealing with the challenges faced by professional services marketers. Look for the next installment in an upcoming blog post from my colleague, [Liz Lindley](#).

In the meantime, I would love to hear from you. What do you think is the most-important thing to communicate to prospective clients to set your firm apart from the competition? Send me a note at mmccormick@jaffepr.com to share or tweet me [@MichelleMcCorm](#).