

COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF YOUR PROGRAM

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As a business development advisor to experiential learning and challenge course programs I spend a lot of time thinking about what it takes to communicate the value of experiential programs to prospective customers. This article includes some suggestions and a self evaluation that you can use to strengthen the way you communicate value to prospective customers.

Recently, while on vacation with my family, I drove into town to find a bookstore. As I searched for and eventually found a parking space, maneuvered my way through the isles trying to prevent my 19-month-old son from pulling books off shelves and then waited in an unusually long checkout line I began to question why I didn't just stay at the lake house where we were vacationing. After-all it would have been easier to just relax in a canoe. Yet for me there was a compelling reason to find a good book and it was worth the effort.

In the weeks leading up to our vacation I had been dreaming of reading a book in the lakeside hammock at my wife's family home. The promise of relaxing with a good novel in that familiar hammock was so compelling to me that I was willing to do whatever it took to make it a reality. I did not mind the traffic, the parking, chasing my son through the isles, or the long check out line because I was completely sold on the promise of laying in that hammock. In my mind, the hammock promised relaxation, rejuvenation, a much needed break and the intellectual stimulation of a good book. When I returned to the lake house with my son and a small stack of books, I went directly to the hammock and within minutes I knew the trip into town had been more than worthwhile.

This brought me to thinking about the business of operating a challenge course and communicating value. What I have learned, is that as a field we do a great job of communicating information about what we do, but we often do a poor job of communicating the value of what we do.

For those of us who are part of the field of experiential education, it is clear that the experiences we offer are powerful, transformational, and important. Yet that does not mean that our prospective customers understand the value we have to offer. Far too often prospective customers, even those with the greatest need for our services, just think we hang from ropes and climb big things. That is they know what we do but they do not understand the value of what we do.

One of my clients is a great example of this. She has a solid experiential program that transforms lives and challenges participants to learn what they are capable of achieving. Her program is exciting and dynamic and it uses state-of-the-art teaching methodologies to open lines of communication and to build trust among participants. Not only that, her program is fun and she is even fortunate enough to have an amazing location.

She has huge advantages. Yet for years she struggled to get the phones to ring. That is until we worked on helping her communicate her value. In my normal work I call the hammock promise a value proposition. A value proposition is a succinct statement which describes the specific value a customer can expect to gain from your services or the experiences you lead. In the case of my hammock experience the value proposition was rejuvenation, intellectual stimulation, relaxation, and a much needed break.

In the case of my client, she built a fantastic program in a great location but she had never clarified her value proposition so most people just thought she got people to hang off of poles and climb through the trees. She was even called the “tree climbing lady” on occasion. It was no wonder her phones were not ringing.

She had become known for her process instead of being known for the value she provided. When I began working with her one of my personal goals was for people in her community to begin to call her the “team builder” or the “leadership lady” because these names would speak to her value proposition. Sure enough over a period of several months, we began to shift her marketing materials and the language she used to describe her program so that today she is regularly introduced as a team building expert and today her phones ring with opportunities week after week.

Below is a self evaluation that you can use to assess the strength of your hammock promise/value proposition

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your organization’s marketing materials based on the following 10 questions. 1 is low 5 is high.

1. **NOT AT ALL** completely ineffective and inapplicable
2. **A LITTLE** just barely effective
3. **SOMEWHAT** applicable in some situations
4. **MODERATELY** applicable/effective
5. **DEFINITELY** very applicable/effective

1. _____ My marketing materials clearly depict the intended results of my programs.

2. _____ My marketing materials make a promise and my company/organization consistently strives to deliver on that promise.
3. _____ Prospective clients who read through our marketing materials can obtain a clear understanding of how the impact of their leadership and their ability to collaborate effectively will be different as a result of participating in our programs?
4. _____ The language we use in our marketing materials is clearly understood by our clients and we avoid words like experiential, duo-dango, wild woozy or other jargon.
5. _____ The photos in our marketing materials are of good quality and are "inclusive". They have people in them and they are warm, inviting and inspiring. The photos are taken from a participant's perspective vs. an observer's perspective and increase our prospect's understanding of what it feels like to participate in our programs.
6. _____ Someone reading my marketing materials who has never heard of my field can quickly understand how my program will make their life better, their work better, etc.
7. _____ My marketing materials describe the ideal relationship between my organization and the people we wish to serve.
8. _____ My marketing materials paint an enthusiastic picture of what it feels like to participate in an Ideal Customer Relationship[®] and compel my prospective clients to participate in this relationship. (Typically a long-term relationship.)
9. _____ Our marketing materials describe what makes us different and our clients can get an understanding of those differences through testimonials from other clients.
10. _____ Our marketing materials are a bold celebration of achievement. They convey a sense of urgency and a "call to action" that is linked to our sales process. Prospects who read through our marketing materials know exactly what they need to do to enter into an Ideal Customer Relationship[®] with my firm.

Add up your total and multiply by 2 to evaluate whether or not your marketing materials get a passing grade on a 100 point scale. We often recommend to our clients that they plan on only having a 10% return on their marketing efforts. That means for every 100 mailers you send out only 10% will result in live client contact. Your marketing materials must rate between 80 to 100 to reach this level of effectiveness.

Once you have customers, work hard to hang on to them because attracting new ones is five times more expensive than the cost of satisfying and retaining current customers. The longer you are in a relationship with a client, the greater the potential profit margin and the greater benefit they will obtain from your hard work.

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