

Opinion

Is anybody listening?

By Andrew Hedley, director, Hedley Consulting



TECHNOLOGY HAS enabled mass communication at a level never before experienced. With over 12,000 specialist publications in the UK, enabled by improved technology and ever-reducing production costs, the ability to talk in a highly focused way is at a new threshold. This promise of highly targeted messages together with the compelling propositions they can carry has enticed many professional firms into the brave new world of direct marketing communications with their clients and prospects.

They enter the fray at a time when the feedback from many clients is that 'less is more' and 'quality must prevail over quantity'. However for many firms, the objective appears to be maximising the noise they create rather than relevant communication. The former simply adds to disaffection but the latter really makes a difference to clients' businesses and enhances their perception of the professional at the same time.

The firms winning this battle for 'share of ear' are those that understand the multi-faceted nature of good communication and how it must permeate throughout their business.

Conventional marketing theory is clear in terms of how an integrated communications strategy should be constructed but fails to recognise the nuances that make professional services different from other parts of industry. Like all service organisations, the delivery of the service is inseparable from the person who produces it. Like all service organisations, the variability found between people introduces challenges in terms of providing a consistent brand experience. However, unlike much of the service sector, communication (in its broadest sense) and the efficient transfer of knowledge is at the core of the service provided by professionals. The implication of this simple fact is far ranging when viewed through the eyes of the client.

Superb external communications controlled by the marketing department is not enough. It must be reinforced by similarly articulate exchanges on a day to day basis between the people who represent the firm and those clients and prospects with whom they interact.

The goal of any successful communications strategy in the professions must be an integrated model that reinforces the client's perception at every touch point with the firm. Indeed, analysis of the range of these touch points is an instructive exercise for any managing partner.

While firms are generally competent at managing the formal aspects of their communications mix (for example websites, press releases, bulletins, brochureware and seminars) they tend

to be less joined up when a broader horizon is considered that embraces, for example, letters, agreements, documentation and telephone conversations.

A confused and incoherent message will often reach the ears of the client. Inconsistencies between the promises carried in marketing communication materials, and the quality of interaction experienced through day-to-day dealings with the business, are thrown into sharp contrast.

Inevitably, the actual experience of the client forms the lasting impression. The communication that really matters is that which takes place every day rather than that conducted in the highly controlled environment of the seminar room or corporate communications department.

Recognising that succinct, plain-English communication is one of the service factors prized most highly by clients has led to many firms investing in ongoing training. Stepping away from deeply technical language, and into a world of short sentences, simple language and clear recommendations will, in itself, create a competitive advantage.

It may seem a paradox but the best communicators are generally also great listeners. It is an old maxim of the salesman that the two ears and one mouth in your possession should be used in that proportion. Another idiom – that "telling isn't selling", reinforces the point. But professionals love to talk; demonstrate how much they know; and force their preconceived notions on to the client's table.

It is not that the professional does not have an intellectual appreciation of the importance of listening to clients. How well a firm listens is one of the key criteria assessed in service quality research. Consequently, a number of firms have re-named their 'client-review programme' a 'client-listening programme'. The key question is how much has client experience changed as a result of this new emphasis on auditory excellence?

Like all aspects of the communication process, the demonstration of true client orientation is contained in the actions that follow the exchange rather than the platitudes given at the time. ■

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