The Customer Space: *Why Your Messaging Needs to Be There*
by Mary Sullivan

The marketing world has turned upside down. Customers are no longer passive targets. They control the market, with Internet access to virtually every vendor, anywhere. They even influence the purchasing decisions of others through blogs and forums.

What hasn't changed, though, is that customers are looking for what they want and/or need. And yet marketers still try to lure them with features and benefits. "What?!" you say. "We're supposed to state a benefit with every feature we mention. We've been following the rules." Well, the rules are out of date. Customers are tuning out benefits.

What's wrong with benefits statements? Typically, they are still product-focused. When marketers describe a flat panel display as "space saving" or an encryption algorithm as "secure", they are talking about product attributes.

We're bombarded by some 3,000 marketing messages daily—from TV commercials to sign boards to the logo on the jacket of the person in the elevator with you. The human mind filters out all but a small number of these messages. What we do notice is almost invariably about us!

People pay attention when the message is about them. Think about when you overheard a conversation that interested you. You probably noticed it because it pertained to you in some way. People tune in when you:

- Talk about them
- Mention what's on their minds
- Indicate that you can resolve a problem, want or need that they have

See the accompanying article "[The Power of Customer-Centric Messaging](#)" for examples of customer attention-grabbing messages.

Vendor space vs. customer space. In "The Support Economy", Shoshana Suboff laments that, "Too often vendors live in a world of their own, thinking up what to make and then figuring out how to sell it. Meanwhile, customers live in their own spaces knowing about their *wants and needs* and rarely communicating these ideas to the people who can fulfill them." This is especially true for technology companies. Technologist founders are passionate about their product, but rarely give much thought to what customers want.

If your messaging is still in the "vendor space" or product space, you're missing opportunities. Prospective customers are simply tuning you out. They're the people

who spend three seconds on your website and move on, or the prospects who discard your direct mailer without opening it. And they may be people whose eyes glaze over during your sales presentations!

Messaging is how you communicate with customers. To develop effective messaging, you must first understand the wants and needs of the people—consumers or business people—you want to reach. To learn about them, you can:

- Conduct market research, preferably primary research where you have real conversations with real customers or prospects.
- Make your website interactive so you can learn about prospects based on their clicks.
- If you already have customers, invite some of them to participate on a Customer Advisory Board.

Whatever methods you choose, invest as much time and budget as you can afford to learn what issues or desires cause buyers to purchase what you offer.

Next, be clear about your position in your market—not based on the product or service you sell, but from the customer's point of view. Will your on-demand application make the decision-maker look good because of the rapid payback? Is it cooler for teens to be seen with your cell phone than the others? When you address how you resolve a customer's concern, focus on the resolution that distinguishes you from your competition.

Move over to "resolution messaging". Too many businesses still use the old messaging model developed before customers took over the reigns and started determining how, when and where they would buy. The old model was to build a product with cool features and then sell customers on the benefits.

~~PRODUCT SPECS > FEATURES > BENEFITS~~

It's time to flip the model, and replace benefits with "resolution messages".

RESOLUTIONS > BENEFITS > PRODUCT SPECS

In every aspect of customer communications—from Interest to Engagement to Motivation to the Sale—communicate a resolution message. Show that you know how to resolve the customer's problem.

Identify real customer wants and needs, and then and only then, create messages that explain how you *resolve* those problems. Don't develop statements that you can't prove, because once you make a claim, customers want to know how you'll accomplish what you say. Here at last, in the proof, is the opportunity to talk about your features! But it isn't the first thing you mention, it's one of the last!

Your team may be so close to your product and marketing methods that it is hard to be objective about message development. An independent facilitator can keep you focused on your target customers and help you create compelling messages.

For every real customer want or need you uncover, you should be able to readily state a resolution. Different customers will focus on different issues, so in the selling stage, personalize your messages.

You'll also find there are some "universal" customer problems. Your resolutions for them are **key messages** that should appear above the fold on your website, at the top of your direct marketing pieces or emails, and in every sales presentation.

If your message is powerful, you can use it sparingly. But use it at every stage in your communication with customers and prospects—Interest, Engagement, Motivation, and the Sale. And don't forget to use it again after the sale, to upsell your existing customers. They have wants and needs, too!

About the Author:

Mary Sullivan is a co-founder of KickStart Alliance. Through a tech career that has included sales, marketing and product management, she has learned to appreciate the power of resolving customer problems. She brings customer-centric messaging to all three KickStart Alliance practice areas—Positioning, Lead Generation, and Sales Readiness. For help developing and using customer-centric messages for your business, contact Mary at marysullivan@kickstartall.com

To garner customer insights through Customer Advisory Boards, contact Mike Gospe at mikeg@kickstartall.com for planning and facilitation.