

Beyond Dilbert

Marketing professional services

by Margaret McCaffery

Engineers have an innate mistrust of the intangible: if you can't see it and measure it, how do you know it works? This is healthy scepticism, but also keeps engineering out of the spotlight. Where marketing is concerned, engineers have to deal with perceptions, because they are the reality that leads to effective business development.

Admit it, now, you've laughed at those Dilbert cartoons making fun of the marketing department, haven't you? You know, the ones where Dilbert threatens to reprogram the marketing staff's computer so that it alters their DNA, and they recoil in horror. Or where Bob the Dinosaur summarizes marketing strategy as "Don't improve the product, just find dumber customers."

But what if you are the product? Engineering may be thought of as a commodity in run-of-the-mill situations, but when a serious problem occurs or a high profile project is up for tender, sophisticated clients want the best people, not the best CAD program.

It's then that engineers wish they'd paid more attention to marketing, because no matter how good you know you are, what closes the deal is how good the prospective client/employer thinks you are. Marketing

should encompass whatever it takes to bring the two perceptions together.

Smoke and mirrors?

Marketing oneself is an uncomfortable experience for most professionals. You spend many years learning, you strive for absolute precision, and you're held to a high standard of accuracy. No wonder you regard marketing as a "smoke and mirrors" activity! But regardless of your expertise, marketing is about clients, and clients are people.

So when the marketing department wants to put you in a hard hat and plaster "action shots" of you all over the company brochure or website, while you'd rather put in a site drawing, stop and think about the client. What will make the impression on the client that will get them to call you? It may not be a technical detail:



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it may be their comfort level in knowing which person will be handling their work.

Peter Halsall, P.Eng., president of structural engineering and building science specialists Halsall & Associates, believes that up to 90 per cent of clients make their purchasing decisions on the basis of people they feel comfortable with. Of course, the comfort level begins with competence—but it doesn't *end* there.

As a communications consultant whose clients are mostly in the professions, I run into these situations all the time:

- ◆ The lawyers who want to list all of their external activities in the firm's brochure, when that will create the impression they haven't got time for their clients.
- ◆ The chartered accountants who want to place a small advertisement announcing their name change, and fill it with all of their services, reducing the type to an illegible size.
- ◆ The consulting engineers who want to rewrite the description of their firm every time they send out marketing materials, when that will reduce their opportunity to create a recognizable corporate identity.

This kind of thinking is rooted in what the seller has to sell, rather than in what the buyer wants to buy. The strategy of marketing is in aligning the two.

In fact, in its conceptual stages, marketing can be as analytical as engineering. Teachers of marketing talk about the six Ps—product, package, position, price, promotion and place. Applying these concepts to professional services makes marketing efforts much more strategic. Even Dilbert would approve!

Product

The knowledge that professional engineers possess, and their ability to apply it to meet the client's needs, are

very valuable products. The ability to view the product this way enables a company to establish appropriate pricing and promotion.

Too often, the designs, drawings or other commodities the engineers will produce are considered to be the product, and the real product ends up being undervalued and underpromoted. Chartered accountants have been saying for years that knowledge-based industries must find a way to show their "knowledge assets" on their balance sheets. Accounting firms have been among the first licensed professionals to promote their knowledge as the product. Ernst & Young Canada has the tag line "From thought to finish," while Grant Thornton Canada's line is "The strength of advice."

Package

No, this doesn't necessarily mean putting everyone in uniforms stamped with the company logo! It does mean thinking creatively about clients' needs, and then creating "packages" of services that will meet these needs.

For example, H.H. Angus & Associates, well known for its mechanical and electrical engineering, had created software for its own use that could be very beneficial to anyone managing a facility. After the company talked with several clients to get a sense of the demand for the product, Angus Systems Group was born. For company president Harry Angus, P. Eng., talking to clients is key. "Ask enough clients enough questions, and you'll see what they need," he says. The biggest change in marketing over the last decade, he thinks, has been the realization that "it's not what we have to sell, but what we can do to help the client."

Nora Gubins, director of marketing for chartered accountants Grant Thornton, agrees. "Marketing has tended to equal promotion in the past," she notes. "But we're looking much more closely now at what the client needs, and packaging our services to meet those needs."

Position

It's not enough to decide what your product is and how you're going to package it. You also need to decide where you belong in the marketplace. The trick with positioning is to pick the position you want to occupy, not just the one you have now.

Is there a group of clients with a specialized need that your company/department can fill? Or do you want

to be known as a full-service organization, competing with everyone in the same field all over the world?

Halsall & Associates, already well known for their structural design and building science, are experiencing growth in the advisory end of their business, and are repositioning their company as a result. Their new logo describes them as engineers and consultants, rather than as consulting engineers. Some clients need a database of information about their buildings, to guide their planning and decision making. Others need a capital reserve plan for future maintenance needs. The firm can provide both, out of its specialized knowledge of structural design and building science.

Peter Halsall comments that professional engineers are different from, say, lawyers "because we have to earn the advisor role." His firm's new slogan is "Where science and service meet."

The emphasis is on meeting the client's needs, rather than on providing a "one-size-fits-all" engineering solution.

Peter Overton, director of marketing and communications for Marshall Macklin Monaghan, says that multi-disciplinary firms, in particular, have to bring something else to the table to win sophisticated clients. "We position ourselves as partners, problem solvers and developers, not just engineers," he says. "Engineering is only one component, because, these days, clients want a turnkey solution."

Price

Professional services have become more and more competitive in pricing over the last decade. Even lawyers, who simply used to send in a bill based on number of hours worked, are being asked for fixed-price quotations, or to add value by providing other services at no extra charge. But that's where positioning comes into the picture, according to Bruce Thomas, managing partner of Cassels, Brock & Blackwell, a large Bay Street law firm. "Price is most important when you're providing basic, predictable services," he says. "When the barn's on fire, price is not a factor. You need to position yourself as far up the value chain as possible, letting the world know that you can handle sophisticated work."

It also pays to be creative, looking at the client's long-term needs. Cassels Brock, for example, deals with many emerging companies, especially in the high technology field. The firm has developed special pricing strategies for start-ups, which might want the strength of a big Bay Street firm, but might believe they couldn't afford one.

Mary Ann Freedman, whose firm Freedman & Associates provides marketing support to many professional services firms, advises her clients to take the lead on value-added billing, always keeping an eye on how the client is changing. "You can't afford to think in a linear fashion about pricing," she comments. "Know the client's hot buttons and come forward with ideas, without waiting to be asked."

Promotion

You need to have a marketing mix to ensure that you're maximizing opportunities to remind existing and potential clients about who you are and what you do.

Take advertising, for example. I advise clients with limited advertising budgets to think in terms of four smaller, well-designed ads, rather than one big, splashy one. Advertising research has shown the impact of frequency: the more frequently they're seen, the more impact ads have.

Most professional services firms think in terms of brochures, proposals and newsletters, and have now adapted the same concepts to their websites. Ken Boynton, marketing manager for Acres International, stresses that consulting engineering firms have to think digitally: "We've kept conventional marketing tools, like brochures and annual reports, but we've also updated them and made them available via the Internet, CD ROM, video conferences, etc. There's an acceleration of what you can provide; things can be instantly customized, yet still retain consistent messages."

Graham Williams, P.Eng., vice president of marketing for Acres International, adds that this extends to the whole engineering process, where drawings are transferred around the world overnight: "While one half of the world is sleeping, the other half is working."

Place

Where do you do all of this? With the global reach of engineering firms today, the Internet has become the place to be for marketing. Prequalification rounds for tenders are being done on the Internet, often before a firm knows that it's in the running. Making a good impression in cyberspace is essential, especially when dealing with overseas clients. Nora Gubins emphasizes that it's a two-way street: "You can use your website to gather information and feedback from clients."

Who should market professional services?

Everyone! You can't afford the "I'm an engineer, not a salesperson" attitude. The marketing department, or marketing consultant if you outsource that function, is there to help plan the strategy and provide the tools. But the person who answers the phone is as important to a firm's marketing culture as the CEO. Marketing professional services is not a single activity, it's a culture. It must be targeted, well resourced and constant. ◆

Margaret McCaffery, a former director of communications at PEO, is now president of Canterbury Communications, a Toronto-based consulting agency specializing in professional services firms.



Marketing professional services:

What Dilbert doesn't tell you

Do:

- ◆ Think big picture, whole firm marketing.
- ◆ Plan ahead, with room to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity.
- ◆ Involve everyone in the marketing plan.
- ◆ Target your efforts to reach only the clients you want.
- ◆ Have marketing materials professionally written and designed.

Don't:

- ◆ Adopt a shotgun approach.
- ◆ Leave marketing only to the marketing department.
- ◆ Think you can ever stop marketing.
- ◆ Disregard professional advice.
- ◆ Think you know what clients want—ask them!