



## Five Myths of Professional Services Marketing

By Michael W. McLaughlin

For decades, professional service providers, including consultants, accountants, lawyers, and others, rarely marketed their services. Instead, they thrived in a cozy world where personal relationships and word-of-mouth generated enough new clients to grow a profitable business. Those days are long gone.

With so many business advisors to choose from, clients can quickly tap the minds of an army of experts for help. To compete in this market, professional service providers must challenge the conventional wisdom on marketing and selling professional services.

A good place to start is to dispel the following five myths.

### **Myth 1: Flawless Work Is Enough**

Some professionals believe that success is only about delivering outstanding results. The reasoning is that, if you do great work, a client will hire you when new needs arise, and will send you valuable referrals for new business.

It's true that flawless delivery is essential for long-term success. If you can't meet the promise of delivering outstanding results, you should consider pulling back from the business until you can. Few professional service firms survive with a string of service failures in their history.

But you just can't assume in today's business environment that word of your great performance will travel through your client's organization—let alone on to other potential clients.

To thrive, combine flawless service with a systematic, coordinated marketing program targeted at existing clients. Prepare specific, proactive client-level marketing plans that get the word out about your value.

### **Myth 2: Effective Marketing Plans Are Tough To Create**

Marketing literature is full of advice on building a marketing plan, so if your eyes are rolling about now, bear with me. Contrary to what you might think, it doesn't take a marketing guru to develop a proactive, market-specific plan that articulates how you will find and hold onto profitable clients.

The most effective marketing plan is short—seven sentences to be exact. It should fit on a single page. Feel free to add as much detail as you'd like, but begin with the basics. Even if you already have a marketing plan, try to re-craft it using these seven sentences:

1. Explain the purpose of your marketing
2. Explain how you achieve that purpose by describing the benefits you provide
3. Describe your target market(s)

4. Describe your niche
5. Outline the marketing tactics you will use
6. Reveal the identity of your practice
7. Quantify your marketing budget

Your marketing plan will force you to make choices and reflect on the type of business you want to build. Most importantly, once you've created your marketing program, take action and never stop.

### **Myth 3: The Internet Offers Limited Marketing Opportunities**

Even with a referral in hand, the majority of prospective clients head straight to your Web site to assess your firm's capabilities. Often, that Web site visit is the prospective client's first impression of your firm.

Professional service firms differ from one another in important ways, including size, scope of services, culture, and accomplishments. Yet to clients, professional service firms' Web sites look identical.

It's easy to understand why. Just look at the Web sites of a handful of professional service firms, and you'll find similar, hollow marketing messages, such as:

- "Our firm provides lasting services that assist the business with the strategic direction needed to most effectively manage its financial affairs and achieve its objectives."
- "Our passion is providing insights to small businesses which lead you and your organization to financial well-being."
- "We have built our firm with the resources and support to help meet your long and short-term financial goals."

Too many firms waste space on such empty language. For them, the Web remains an untapped resource, when it could be a powerful tool to help create marketplace differentiation. Too often, professionals settle for Web sites that are little more than internet-based yellow pages, ads, or extensions of their promotional literature.

In a world where anyone can access substantive content on every conceivable subject with a click of the mouse, potential clients will not be satisfied if your Web site turns up nothing but drivel.

Your Web site must be an integral part of your marketing efforts. Use it to your advantage by giving prospective clients what they're looking for—the ability to understand how you'll help them address their problems.

Without a Web site that demonstrates how your unique capabilities match up with their needs, today's clients will pass you by.

### **Myth 4: Successful Selling Is About Finding The Client's Pain**

Sales trainers often advise finding a client's "pain" as the first step to sales success. We're advised to ask

prospective clients questions like: What keeps you awake at night? What are your pain points? And, if you had a magic wand, what problem would you solve?

Not only do such questions make a client's eyes cross, they also expose two fatal flaws. First, they proclaim that you are fishing for answers, rather than pursuing a substantive discussion of the issues. At the very least, that demonstrates a lack of preparation.

And second, not all clients are looking for "pain" remedies. Sure, many of the issues that business advisors sort out are tough problems for clients, but it doesn't mean they're painful. Maybe clients want to raise the bar on overall company performance, pursue a new business opportunity, or they just the want to improve some aspect of the business. The help you provide doesn't have to alleviate pain.

Assuming a client is in pain shows you are not paying attention to the client's actual situation. Forget this myth and drive the conversation to the client's real needs.

### **Myth 5: Best Practices Work**

In side-by-side comparisons, most professional service marketing follows a predictable strategy, and that is to make a series of "safe" marketing decisions based on the "best practices" of others.

The result: a me-too marketing strategy that does little to differentiate you from competing firms. Marketing expert Seth Godin warns that, "professional service marketing is certainly among the 'safest' I've ever seen. Because it appears to take no risks, it's actually quite risky."

Of course, there is value in learning from the success of others. Many organizations are facing similar marketing challenges, so copying others may seem like the ultimate shortcut to salvation.

Unfortunately, relying on best practices is a follower's strategy in a market that values leaders. In an era of demands for innovative products and services, why pursue a recycled approach to marketing?

Too often, professional service firms do just that—recycle the ideas of others. For example, if you review how twenty-five firms use best practices to differentiate themselves from others, you find marketing material that emphasizes attributes like quality service, best price, or service responsiveness. Because these differentiators are so overused, they have no power.

Clients view such claims as "table stakes"—the minimum needed to get in the game, not enough to win. I'm not suggesting that you stop using these differentiators, but lead with something more client-focused. Now that would be an innovative practice.

### **No More Myths**

Let's dump the myths and focus on realities. The most successful service marketers have two things in common. First, they don't view marketing as part of the business. For them, marketing is the business. As author and marketing guru Regis McKenna says, "Marketing is everything."

And they're patient with their efforts. Marketing can't be rushed—but it will work. You just have to challenge the myths.

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