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Here's why we can't communicate

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By *Deborah Daily*, Co-founder & President, Buckaroo Marketing | New Media



I learned a long time ago that a large part of serving as the marketing partner for companies is acting as a translator and cultural attaché. No, I'm not multilingual or an expert in etiquette, but so much of what we do involves bridging gaps between people.

In fact, it's rare to find a company or a company leader that isn't struggling with some kind of important gap. Most often, it's a barrier to communication. Sometimes it involves difficulty in getting prospects to understand the advantages of the company's products. Sometimes, it's an inability to articulate the CEO's vision in a way that line employees understand. At other times, it can truly be a cultural gap, such as when a company tries to market to prospects in a different part of the world.

What we think of as barriers to communication actually extend way beyond the written and spoken word. They can encompass the many aspects of culture, linguistics, organizational attitudes, individual emotions, psychology, and more. When companies turn to marketing partners for help in promoting their products or services, most of the time they're really asking for assistance in understanding and getting past those barriers.

One of the most common barriers in marketing is the use of jargon. All companies speak with unique lexicons reflecting their industries, their history, and the educational background of their leaders and employees. In an internal meeting or document, that rarely presents a problem, because everyone is familiar with the same terminology. But when the company tries to communicate with an external audience, those barriers get in the way. The audience likely has its own lexicon. What the first company calls a widget, the second may refer to as a thingamajig. Sometimes, the differences can be so significant that it's as though they're speaking completely different languages.

It can happen internally, too. When employees with specialized knowledge — such as engineers or financial managers — try to communicate with other team members who lack that knowledge, barriers can get in the way. In the best cases, those barriers create frustrations. In the worst cases, they can lead to serious problems.

Another common example is when a company fails to grasp what's really important to its audience. The internal staff may be extremely proud that their ratchet assembly is chrome-plated, so they view that as a key market differentiator. What they don't realize is the people they're trying to sell to don't see chrome plating as a big deal. They're more interested in something else, like sealed lubrication.

That's where a marketing partner can help, by developing a deep understanding of the audience's needs and shifting the company's sales messages to focus on those needs. A big part of an effective marketing partner's work is standing in the place of the audience, helping the company get better at seeing what matters, and finding the best ways to present that information. It can be awkward to tell a CEO nobody cares about the aspect that makes them proud, but candor is critical in preventing missteps.

Finally, there are times when getting past a barrier involves tactics you might never consider. A case in point was a construction client that served high-end markets. After doing extensive market research, rebranding, product positioning and key messaging, how else could we enhance that all-important first impression? Was there another way to convince prospects that their services lived up to their expectations for quality and sophistication?

We added another element, both tactical ... and tactile. When people examine finished construction, their evaluation goes beyond a visual assessment. Touch is every bit as important. If you've ever strolled through a model home, you've brushed your fingers across countertops, wallcoverings, and fabrics. You've grasped bannisters and door frames to see how solid they feel. Your eyes may tell you whether the work is to your liking, but your touch becomes the true judge of quality and workmanship.

Reinforcing this idea, we made sure the prospect's first impression capitalized upon the importance of touch by creating a presentation format incorporating a unique, heavy, velvet-like paper stock. When the prospects picked up the presentation book, their immediate impression was one of substance, durability, and style — all critical elements in the type of construction our client performed. The upscale quality of the presentation book also sent the message our client thought the prospect was important. Before the prospect glanced at a single photo or read a single word, they experienced touchable luxury.

Our client knew the importance of tactile impressions in their projects but had never thought of them as a way to eliminate barriers. It's an excellent example of how the right marketing partner can provide the perfect touch.

Deborah Daily is co-owner of Buckaroo Marketing | New Media, a Fishers-based advertising agency established in 1999. She can be reached at ddaily@gobuckaroo.com.



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Inside Indiana Business
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1 Monument Circle, Suite 300
Indianapolis, IN 46204

PHONE: (317) 275-2010

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