

Communicating: A Preface

Because services are intangible, marketing communications for services do more than promote services. Communications make services more tangible, and give prospects something firm to evaluate.

As a result, marketing communications for most services haul around a heavier burden than communications for products. A bright red Porsche 911 convertible, for example, speaks—loudly and beautifully—for itself. Very few services speak for themselves at all.

We implicitly trust most products. We trust that our new tires won't blow out, our brown sugar will taste sweet, and our aspirin will soothe our headaches without bad side effects. But we are far less trusting and certain about most services.

We worry that our lawyers and auto mechanics will do more than necessary, and charge more than necessary. We worry that the latest weight-loss service will fail, just like the three before it. We worry that our remodelers will exceed their budget and finish weeks after they promise. We worry that the collection agency we hire for our service will harass our clients worth keeping and collect only a small part of our outstanding receivables.

So unlike communicating about products, communicating about services must make the service more tangible and real, and must soothe the worried prospect.

It's not like selling Porsche automobiles.

The first two rules of communicating about services:

Make the service visible, and make the prospect comfortable.

Fran Lebowitz and Your Greatest Competitor

It's not a cold, hard world; it's just a very busy one. You know it firsthand: a dozen things compete for your attention, and you have only so much attention to give.

So you must know that your prospects have only so much attention to give, too. Give them powerful reasons to listen to you, or they will give you only ear service. They may listen, but they will not hear.

Your greatest competition is not your competition. It is *indifference*.

Many service marketers know this, but few act on it. Instead of talking about the prospect and what she needs, these marketers talk about their company. Instead of showing what they will do for a prospect, they strive to show how good their company is. Instead of speaking the prospect's language, they speak their own.

The prospect is thinking, "Me, me, me." Unfortunately, the marketer is thinking that, too. The two fail to connect.

Few people are particularly interested in what you have to say. (As Fran Lebowitz once said of people who wore sweatshirts with messages, "People don't want to hear from you—so what makes you think they want to hear from your shirt?") People are interested in *themselves*. Until you realize that, you will be beaten badly by your toughest competitor: indifference.

Your first competitor is indifference.

The Cocktail Party Phenomenon

Psychologists call it the Cocktail Party Phenomenon. (Psychologists, it appears, have learned the value of memorable packaging, too.) You've experienced the cocktail party phenomenon. It works like this:

You're listening to someone at a cocktail party. Suddenly, you hear your name mentioned in a nearby conversation. Now you can hear that conversation, but you no longer can hear the one in which you were involved.

This happens because people cannot process two conversations at once. If you deliver two messages, most people will process just one of them—if that.

Say one thing.

The Grocery List Problem

Actually, the challenge of getting your message across is greater than the Cocktail Party Phenomenon might suggest.

Consider this:

Mom sends you to the store for milk. You bring home the milk.

Next time, she says, "Get raisins, Drano, Gummy Bears, milk, and some hundred-watt light bulbs."

You forget the milk; but it's the milk your family needed most. All you have for breakfast tomorrow is cereal.

You run this risk when you hand prospects a grocery list of different messages about you. They remember the raisins, which aren't important, and forget the milk. Your prospects forget your real point of distinction, and remember a supporting message that hardly matters.

Now, consider some even grimmer evidence against communicating too much. Horace Schwerin and Henry Newell, in their helpful book *Persuasion*, described their test of two commercials for the same car. Commercial one was single-minded: It talked only about performance. Commercial two went further. It pointed out that in addition to exceptional performance, the car offered outstanding styling, a choice of several models, and excellent economy. (This type of commercial is known in the agency business as The Commercial the Client Will Love.)

After showing subjects the two commercials, the testers asked viewers if either commercial might make them switch to that brand of car. Six percent answered yes, the performance spot *would* make them consider switching.

But what about the second commercial, with all that valuable added information—how many were affected by it?
Not one. Zero percent.

Saying many things usually communicates nothing.

Give Me One Good Reason

You want the strongest argument for a single focused message? Ask your prospects.

Your prospects have one basic question: What makes you so different that I should do business with you?

Your prospects are making the classic statement: *Give me one good reason why.*

It's a simple request that begs for a simple response. A complex response will just give your prospect another problem to sort out. Your prospect does not want more to think about; your prospect wants *less*.

An example from retailing shows the importance of a simple message. Go to a good men's store like Barney's in New York. Ask for a blue-striped oxford shirt. A savvy salesman will show you one nice shirt, which you probably will buy. But if he isn't that smart and shows you three shirts, there is an excellent chance you won't buy *any* shirt. The salesperson has complicated your decision and confused you with choices. And it is very hard to sell to a confused person.

Meet your market's very first need: Give it one good reason.

Your Favorite Songs

Driving down the freeway, you switch on your favorite radio station and hear a song for the first time. You like it but do not remember it.

The next afternoon you hear the song again. Perhaps you note the singer, and perhaps you remember her name.

Two mornings later, you hear the song again. After making sure no other commuters are watching, you start singing along with the hook, which you now remember.

Two days later you buy the CD. You play it several evenings. By the third evening, you know most of the words.

It has taken seven or eight playings for the song's message to sink in. But finally, it has.

What if the singer changed the song and tune every time? What would you remember?

Almost nothing.

What does this tell you about your marketing communications?

Can you keep changing your words, your melody, your entire theme?

If you do, what will people remember? For what will they know you?

After you say one thing, repeat it again and again.

One Story Beats a Dozen Adjectives

Pick up a good magazine and glance at a few stories.

You may spot a pattern that tells you something. Today, most nonfiction writers begin their articles with an illustrative story. It's a device so pervasive there is a name for it: synecdoche.

Trial lawyer Gerry Spence almost always makes a point with a story. Spence knows that for all the enormous changes in Western culture since the Greeks, today, almost 2,500 years after Euripides, our primary form of entertainment is still the dramatic narrative—the *story*.

More marketers should discover the power of stories. Just as stories make articles more interesting and make Spence's arguments more persuasive, they make marketing communications more effective.

Synecdoche works because people are interested in other people, and stories are about people. Gerry Spence's story of a person wronged by excessive police force does not need the words "pain" and "injustice." His vivid story makes jurors *feel* the pain and injustice.

Like clever journalists and great lawyers, marketers who tell true stories make their presentations more interesting, more personal, more credible, and more felt—and more persuasive.

Don't use adjectives. Use stories.

Attack the Stereotype

Almost every well-known service suffers from a well-known stereotype.

Accountants are humorless.

Lawyers are greedy.

Collections agencies are bullies.

Doctors keep you waiting.

The stereotype of your service is the first thing that a prospect thinks about. It is the first hurdle you must jump, and the first one over usually wins.

Attack your first weakness: the stereotype the prospect has about you.

Don't Say It, Prove It

Carolyn Adams, then circulation director of the *Utne Reader*, once sent me the magazine's subscription solicitation letters for the past ten years. She said they never had written a letter that could outperform the first one, written by a famous copywriter.

The first letter was the best example of good, readable writing. It was specific, not general. It was concrete, not abstract. It used vivid and familiar examples to make its points. The last sentence of each paragraph enticed you to read the first sentence of the next. The writer never used two words when one would do.

The difference in this letter wasn't direct-marketing gimmicks and tricks. It wasn't the teaser headline on the envelope; it didn't have one. It wasn't the shrewd use of the P.S.; it didn't have one of those, either.

This letter was just good communication. It never said that the *Utne Reader* was great. It skipped all those adjectives and all the puffing, and proved it: This was a very interesting magazine and well worth the price.

Good basic communicating is good basic marketing.

Build Your Case

In the last three years, three of my clients have offered the best service in their entire industry. But do their prospects know it?

Thousands of them didn't know. And puffery would never have convinced them.

So two of the clients commissioned independent customer satisfaction surveys. The scores were astonishing. So they told their prospects.

In one case, they told their prospects that the company had received the highest customer satisfaction scores an independent surveying firm had ever recorded.

In the other, the company asked the respondents to score the client. The company then translated these customer satisfaction scores into grade point averages based on the traditional 4.0 scales. The company's service quality score was a fabulous 3.96.

They built their case.

Merely saying you offer great service will never work. You have to document and demonstrate it.

Create the evidence of your service quality. Then communicate it.

Tricks Are for Kids

A service is a promise. You're selling the promise that at some future date, you will do something.

This means what you really are selling is your honesty.

Tricks and gimmicks aren't honest.

Gimmicky headlines, swimsuit models, direct marketing tricks—they're all a form of bait and switch.

And these tricks say one thing. They tell your prospects you are willing to trick them.

And that tells your prospects that you'll try to trick them again.

Don't.

No tricks.

The Joke's on You

A friend tells you a lame joke.

You laugh, of course. It's human nature.

You send someone what you think is a clever gimmick promotion—let's say, a plastic fish with a note inside: "Let's hook up. We're a great catch," or something (heaven help you) better.

You call to ask your prospect if she received your promotion. She tells you yes, it was clever. Of course she tells you that; it's human nature. She knows you were trying to be clever and that you are hoping for a compliment. So she gives you what sounds like one.

A few more phone calls like that make you think that your clever little promotion is a good idea. (Psychologists call this the false consensus effect; we imagine that people agree with us even though they do not.)

But the basic message of this—"Use us, we're clever"—can make you look silly.

It also can make it seem that because you have nothing important to say, you tell lame jokes instead.

If you think your promotional idea might seem silly or unprofessional, it is.

Being Great vs. Being Good

People in professional services are especially prone to thinking that the better they get, the better their business will be. The more the tax lawyer knows about the tax code, the actuary knows about qualified plans, and the psychologist knows about bipolar personality disorders, the more business will beat a path to their doors.

Two examples suggest this simply is not true, and a third seems to prove it.

The first is on display in every American courtroom today. Brilliant lawyers with a thorough grasp of the law drone on as judges watch the clocks and jurors nod. The lawyers are trying to sell their technical excellence, but their audience—the people who decide whether the lawyer will win or lose—want something else.

The practice of medicine suggests a similar problem. In a remarkably short time, medical science has found cures for the plagues that killed millions of our ancestors: polio, tuberculosis, and smallpox. A woman with a fatally defective heart can now buy a new one. Psychiatrists can now medicate patients with severe disorders and make them far more functional than they could be

ten years ago. The medical industry clearly has become technically more competent and expert. The industry clearly has become much better at delivering the expert part of its service.

And so the medical industry should be riding a wave of popularity. Yet 37 percent of people say doctors lack a genuine interest in their patients. Less than half believe that doctors explain things well to patients. Doctors believe that technical proficiency is the measure of their worth, but patients view the relationship side as so critical—there's even a name for it, bedside manner—that they think medicine is failing as a service.

But the best evidence that superior performance is not critical to success in services probably comes from the financial markets. In the 1995 Goldman Sachs report *The Coming Evolution of the Money Management Industry*, the firm confessed that the real business of money management is not skillfully managing money. It is “gathering and retaining assets”—marketing, to cut right to the point. Is Goldman Sachs simply ignoring their clients' insistence on performance? Not at all. When asked to rank the most important criteria for choosing an investment firm, clients consistently put return on investment—the best evidence of technical proficiency in investing—*below* trust and other “relationship issues.” In one survey, clients rated track record ninth out of seventeen attributes, rating it below “a sincere desire for a long-term relationship,” among other seemingly soft criteria.

Prospects do not buy how good you are at what you do. They buy how good you are at who you are.

Superiority

David Ogilvy, who turned his genius for advertising into the famous Ogilvy & Mather agency and, later, a huge chateau in France, once observed that marketers are wrong to emphasize superiority.

Ogilvy argued you can accomplish just as much by convincing a prospect that your service is “positively good.”

You can test the validity of Ogilvy's observation with your own experience:

How often are you really looking for the very best service: the very best baby-sitter, cleaning lady, or tax adviser? (Not often.)

How often do you even know the best when you find it? (Not often.)

How long are you willing to look to find the very best, when someone very good is readily available? (Not long.)

How much more will you pay for the very best, especially if very good is good enough? (Not much.)

How much do you trust other people's assessment of the “very best”? (Not much.)

How good does anything have to be to satisfy you? (Only very good; anything better is a bonus.)

And a critical question: How do you respond when a service tells you it is the very best? (Skeptically, and not very well; it sounds like bragging and puffing.)

People who conduct oral surveys for service clients quickly learn something surprising and disappointing to their clients. If the surveyor asks: “What is the main reason you continue to do business with this company?” the most common answer they hear, even from clients of superior services, is “I just feel *comfortable* with them.”

Not superiority. Not even excellence.

Just simple old leather-slippers comfort.

Our competitive culture fills us with the desire to be Number One. It's exciting to be part of the best; best *does* have its rewards. But the assumption that being the very best is a necessary marketing position, much less a uniquely powerful one, is refuted by experience: your own.

Convey that you are “positively good.”

The Clout of Reverse Hype

A gutsy professional firm once demonstrated the weakness of hype by creating a truly unusual ad.

Their little ad understated everything. They eliminated almost every adjective. Out went “unique” along with its modest replacement, “distinctive.” They slashed “exceptional,” too—except the exceptional that referred to the quality of many competitive firms!

And so it went.

The resulting ad's impact was—even in the words of these professionals who despised hyperbole—“remarkable.”

For days, professional peers stopped the firm's members on the street to remark on the ad. Despite the firm's relatively tiny size, it received dozens of inquiries from prospective hires who before then had never heard of the firm. Executives from noncompeting firms called the office manager to ask who had created the ad. Other executives contacted the creators to ask for an ad just like it—“something everyone will notice and talk about.”

People notice marketing communications that refuse to strain the truth because people notice the unusual, and understatement is unusual.

Far better to say too little than too much.

The First Banks Lesson: People Hear What They See

A researcher once asked twenty business owners what several First Banks' commercials were communicating—and shocked the creators.

These commercials featured an attorney preparing to climb Everest. His preparation included studying previous climbs, weather patterns, and other pertinent information. The Banks' explicit message, intoned by the announcer, was that success in anything requires information, and that First Banks had “the information you need to make good financial decisions.”

But the people watching the commercial didn't hear the words. They saw the pictures, most of which showed the attorney practicing rock climbing. From those pictures, those people decided that First Banks was saying it was strong and solid, like the man and mountain, apparently—a message totally unintended by the people who created the commercial.

People hear what they see. A memorable 1980 ad for an interior decorator in Portland, Oregon, suggested it:

"The longer your office says 'Struggling Young Attorney,'" the headline read, "the longer the struggle."

People cannot see your service. So, as the ad reminds us, they judge your service by what they can see. If people see one thing while you are saying another, the First Banks example shows that seeing really is believing: *People will trust their eyes far before they will ever trust your words.*

Look at your business card. Your lobby. Your shoes. What do your visibles say about the invisible thing you are trying to sell?

Watch what you show.

Make the Invisible Visible

We hear someone say, "He bought it sight unseen."

They say it—and we hear it—with amazement. We cannot imagine someone buying something without seeing it first.

Potential buyers are hesitant to consider things they cannot see. So they emphasize what they *can* see.

As a result, visual symbols of a service become important. Willy Loman, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, knew the importance of a shoeshine because he knew that people look for clues. Lawyers devote intense attention to having the right end tables, chairs, and lighting that will capture their essence. Most accountants dress carefully and conservatively by conscious design, to communicate that they are methodical and attentive to detail.

Consciously or subconsciously, these people are performing an act of marketing. They are trying to make the invisible visible.

Not surprisingly, the industry that best understands the importance of visualizing the invisible offers the least visible service of all: insurance. Prudential has its Rock of Gibraltar, Travelers its umbrella, Allstate its Good Hands, Transamerica its tower, Wausau its railroad station. Each uses a visual metaphor to describe the company.

Many services, recognizing this principle and the principle that services are simply relationships among people, visualize their business with the person behind it: Charles Schwab, Henry Block, Colonel Sanders, Dave Thomas, Joel Hyatt, and Wolfgang Puck.

Ad agencies have constantly visualized their service through their people: through Leo Burnett (Leo Burnett), David Ogilvy (Ogilvy & Mather), Jay Chiat (Chiat Day), Bill Bernbach (Doyle Dane Bernbach), and Mary Wells (Wells, Rich & Green).

Consider, too, the leather portfolios that investment firms use to symbolize prosperity, the Doric columns that many law firms use to symbolize longevity, or the padded shoulders that the armed services use to symbolize strength.

Prospects look for visual clues about a service. If they find none, they often look to services that do have them. So provide clues.

Make sure people see who you are.

The Orange Test

You go to a store looking for oranges. You sort through the batch; choose the richest, orangest ones; and take them home.

You have been fooled.

There is no correlation between the orangeness of an orange and its flavor. Growers pick oranges when they are green, and at that moment, the oranges are as rich, ripe, and juicy as they will ever be.

The rich orange color is actually the orange growers' trick. The growers take the green oranges into the plant and "gas" them with an ethylene compound, which breaks down the chlorophyll in the peel that makes the peel green. (In states where it is still legal, growers also may dye the orange with Red Dye Number 2). So the orangeness is not an assurance of flavor. It is the result of all the extra chemicals and labor that went into fooling us, and for which we pay extra every time we buy an orange.

Yet even people who know this still pluck out the orangest oranges from the grocery's stock. People who know better—*people like me*—still are fooled by the orange's package.

This sounds very familiar, because every day in every city and town, this same act plays itself out when people choose a service. Not knowing what's really inside the service, people look to the outside. Unable to see the service, they choose it based solely on the things they can see—in many cases, *even when they know better.*

Seeing is believing. So check your peel.

Our Eyes Have It: The Lessons of Chicago's Restaurants

Richard Melman is the wizard behind Scoози's, Ed Debevic's, and several of Chicago's other most popular restaurants.

Many connoisseurs take Melman's success as another sign that image is everything, that in restaurants, looking good is better than cooking good.

The critics miss the point. They assume that restaurants are in the food business. Not so; *restaurants are in the entertainment business.* People go to restaurants for the *experience.* They even go to famous restaurants with great cuisine—like the Mansion at Turtle Creek or 510 Groveland—to see what all the fuss is about, to experience what others have, to see who might be there, and to dress up.

Melman's success, then, illustrates the wisdom of knowing what business you are really in, and selling what people are buying.

But Melman's critics also ignore another factor in Melman's success that is important to any marketer. Few people have discriminating tastes like the late James Beard, who could discern the entire recipe for a complex sauce from one sip. Instead, our perceptions of the quality of almost everything—from professional advice to veal scallopini—are often unsophisticated. Because of this, our perceptions are very vulnerable to influence. When we try the roast duck at the Mansion at Turtle Creek, for example, it tastes good in large part because of the glowing reviews, the gorgeous atmosphere, and the stratospheric prices. Can most of us

really taste the difference in the Mansion's roast duck? Not at all.

Like good restaurateurs, service marketers must create the visual surroundings—from the parking lot to the last page of the proposal—that will enhance the client's perception of quality. Offer quality without creating that perception of quality and you have failed the client, and yourself.

Everything visual associated with your service sends a powerful clue about your service. The influence of these visual clues is not superficial; they go to the very heart of your "product" and your relationship with the client.

Watch—and perfect—the visual clues you send.

How to Save Half a Million

You can walk into several large local service companies and find almost \$500,000 worth of sales brochures displayed on their walls.

What you cannot do is tell where those brochures came from and what company stands behind them.

No two look the same. No two reinforce a common message.

Their inconsistency makes the company look inconsistent and disorganized. A whole set of negative associations follow from that.

If you run Bob's Business Services, you want people to say "Oh, that brochure is from Bob's Business Services." Words alone will not get that response because our memories are primarily visual. We remember faces but forget names. So show a common face. Make that investment worthwhile.

Repeat yourself visually, too. It makes you look more organized and professional, and easier to remember.

The Hearsay Rule

Thanks to O.J. Simpson's "Trial of the Century," millions more people now know something about the hearsay rule.

The Hearsay Rule puzzles many viewers and law students, but rests on a basic human principle: To evaluate what someone says, a person needs to see the speaker. The jurors must see the witness; they cannot just hear what the witness says.

This principle of presenting a legal argument also applies to presenting the argument for a service. Prospects need to see you to decide about you. They want to see signals that convey who you are—even the subtlest signals: Your watch—is it showy? Your shoes—are the backs polished, too? Your eyes—do they suggest you are not telling the whole truth?

The prospect is being invited into a relationship, and wonders—*with whom?*

Who are these people?

This is what the prospect is asking, yet most service companies ignore the question. They institutionalize their company instead of personalizing it. The prospect wants to see flesh and blood; the company shows brick and mortar—a picture of the building and some symbols for the service. Or the company shows stock photos of paid models shaking hands or meeting to discuss an important issue in this company, where none of them work.

Good salespeople know better. They know that if a prospect declines a face-to-face meeting but requests "some information about your company," they rarely will make the sale. They know the prospect must see them to believe them, and buy.

The salesperson knows this principle of selling a service, which is the principle behind the Hearsay Rule: People must see who is saying something to decide whether they will buy it.

Give your marketing a human face.

Metaphorically Speaking: The Black Hole Phenomenon

For years, physicists discussed an important phenomenon: the gravitationally completely collapsed object.

Physicists knew these objects had profound implications. These objects could answer the question "How did the universe begin, and how might it end?"

For years, this discussion was just among leading physicists. Then some creative physicist devised a better name for a gravitationally completely collapsed object.

He called it a black hole.

Suddenly, the whole world was interested. People were intrigued by the concept of a hole in space, which itself already seemed like an enormous hole. The idea of something black in space, which already is black—well, this whole concept intrigued millions of people.

Now people were talking. Sci-fi movies featured half-mad cowboy astronauts rushing suicidally into black holes.

The words "black hole" changed how people thought. Most important, the words helped people get the idea of a gravitationally completely collapsed object.

Your words matter. One word or metaphor can quickly define your concept and your uniqueness, and make your concept compelling.

If you are selling something complex, simplify it with a metaphor.

The Generative Power of Words: The Gettysburg Address

The battlefield was not a testament to heroism. It was an ugly health hazard—a field of corpses that deeply concerned Pennsylvania's governor.

Nor was that corpse-strewn field a monument to greatness. The North's general, Meade, had so bungled the battle, leaving

Lee to regroup, that he submitted his resignation to Lincoln. But Meade's opponent, Lee, had done no better, marching blindly into slaughter—a blunder so great that he submitted his resignation, too.

The battlefield was Gettysburg, and no one—aside from the people who teach American history or those who have read Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*—sees Gettysburg as it was. Instead, they see Gettysburg as a symbol of heroism and a testament to people's commitment to their beliefs.

The enormous gulf between the perception of Gettysburg and the reality can be explained in 276 words: the Gettysburg Address. With one deft speech, Lincoln changed almost everything—including our view of the Declaration of Independence and the view of millions of Americans living then and now.

Lincoln's address vividly demonstrates the generative power of words: the power of words not simply to describe reality, but to create it. Our perception of Gettysburg has become the reality, just as our perceptions are changed by words every day.

With six ingenious words—"We're Number Two, we try harder"—Avis changed reality in the car rental business. With "when it absolutely positively has to be there overnight," Federal Express swallowed up an enormous share of the overnight delivery business. With "the personal computer," Apple Computer got computers into homes and accelerated a revolution in civilization. Later, with two words, "desktop publishing," Apple created a concept that made the purchase of that "home" computer not merely tolerable to corporations, but desirable.

Some words are wisps; others are warheads. The famous direct-mail writer John Caples once changed one word in an ad—substituting "fix" for "repair"—and increased the response to the ad 20 percent.

In the invisible world of services, where precious little can be shown and everything must be described, words are the ultimate weapons. Hollow and lazy words generate hollow and lazy responses—if any. Active, fresh, powerful words can do more than merely describe reality. Like Lincoln's words, words can change, shape, and even create reality.

Remember Gettysburg, and the generative power of words.

A Robe Is Not a Robe

Decades ago, Macy's department store was sitting on a pile of terrycloth robes.

They were nice robes.

Then a genius named Bernice Fitzgibbon grabbed them.

"They aren't robes anymore," she said. "They're *blotters*. That's what the Europeans call them. That's how I'll sell them."

Fitzgibbon's ads for Blotters started a run on Macy's inventory. Sales skyrocketed.

Macy's terrycloth robe was still just a terrycloth robe.

Or was it?

Sometimes, it's all in how you say it.

Balderdash

Of course you are "committed to excellence."

Of course you have "a tradition of quality service."

Of course you are "responsive."

And of course, you have become—in nineties-speak—"proactive" and "cost-effective."

But really: When a company pitches *you* that story, do you even try to catch it? Do you listen? Do you trust them?

No, No, No?

You don't listen to clichés. Your clients won't either.

Improve the Silence

Let's pick on accounting firms. They're the worst offenders.

Call an accounting firm and request a brochure. When the brochure arrives, try to read it. Try to figure out quickly what makes that firm an excellent choice.

You can't. And by the way, you won't try.

You'll read the first three paragraphs, then quit. You know it's vague generalizations, not concrete examples. Puff. No proof, no evidence, no interest. Just words—especially adjectives.

Communications like these tell your prospects one thing:

They say *y o u a r e willing to waste that person's time*. No message can hurt you more.

Every prospect hopes you will heed the old New England proverb: "Don't talk unless you can improve the silence."

Get to the point or you will never get to the close.

What's Your Point?

Bob Boylan of Successful Presentations in Minneapolis has built a useful book and a solid business around a presentation concept distilled into three words: What's Your Point?

It's based on Bob's discovery that most presenters don't really know what their point is.

Usually, their point is "I want to sell you something." But to the listener, that point is obvious and meaningless.

Most marketing communications fail for the same reason. They never tell you what their point is.

Tell people—in a single compelling sentence—why they should buy from you instead of someone else.

The Vividness Effect

Just as prospects put great value in *recent* information in making their buying decisions, they also are strongly influenced by *vivid* information. Vivid experiences can take over huge parts of a prospect's memory.

No great salesman better illustrated this Vividness Effect than Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential campaign. To sell Perot to people, Perot used two primary weapons: vivid metaphors (three years later, people still remember "silent sucking sound") and vivid pictures (his famous assortment of colorful charts and graphs).

Long after they had forgotten the many dry details of the debates, people remembered Perot's vivid metaphors and charts. And so, despite his opponents' enormous head start in familiarity, Perot became a formidable competitor—using the vividness effect as his primary marketing weapon.

Perot's weapons were imaginative, but you need not be as spectacular to be vivid. Clear Lake Press in Waseca, Minnesota, recently created a vivid example of its exceptional service. A magazine client needed to print a subscription card to match its other printed materials. Clear Lake's president found an ink company that made a perfect ink match in one try (the client previously had tried twelve matches without luck). The ink company's district manager personally drove the test sample down from Minneapolis to Waseca and then drove it back—almost two hundred miles round-trip.

Fred Betlach of Betlach Jeweler's in Minneapolis uses the vividness effect in the true story of a diamond ring he created for another local jeweler. According to this story, captured in Betlach's brochure, Betlach's finished ring moved the recipient so deeply that she was still crying and unable to talk several hours after she first saw it.

(As further proof that vivid experiences become imprinted in people's memories, people to whom I mention Fred Betlach still ask me, "Is he the jeweler who made that woman cry?")

You can find many ways to be vivid. And you should.

In your words and pictures, make yourself vivid.

Vivid Words

For years, writing teachers have hounded their students to avoid clichés, and to find fresh ways to make their points instead.

It's good marketing advice, too.

People respond to the new and novel and ignore the old, a characteristic that some anthropologists say is a human survival trait. Whenever something new entered a primitive person's environment, he had to study it to decide if it represented a risk. Whatever the explanation, people do respond to things that are new. That is why the very old word "new" still works in advertising.

Sentences free of clichés and other tired words arouse and keep people's curiosity and attention. And fresh words sound sincere, like the real thoughts of the speaker rather than the meaningless recitation of something the speaker read or heard somewhere else, many times before.

Tired clichés and worn-out words bore people. As David Ogilvy once said:

"You cannot bore someone into buying your product."

The Value of Publicity

There are six peaks in Europe higher than the Matterhorn.

Name one.

Get ink.

Advertising Is Publicity

Just when the first snows came to Minnesota in 1994—about the time of the fifth game of the World Series, as luck would have it—a prospect called me. He was desperate to work with me because of the mountain of publicity I had generated for another company in his industry.

I was flattered. But while I did not want to correct the caller, he was wrong. Yes, I had helped generate some publicity for the company—a full-page trade magazine feature, a three-paragraph blurb in a local newspaper business section, and a three-paragraph mention in a national magazine. That was what the company aimed for, and we achieved our objectives. But it was not an avalanche.

Why, then, did it seem like an avalanche to this prospect?

Because we also ran two large ads in that same trade publication at the same time. In his vague memory, this prospect could not distinguish the ads from the articles. All he remembered was what seemed like a lot of publicity—and he wanted an avalanche, too.

The prospect demonstrated another principle of marketing: Advertising is publicity. Advertising is mention in the public forum from which people learn about and come to know the companies mentioned in the ads.

If you want publicity, advertise.

Advertising Begets Publicity

A public relations person contacted a local business magazine editor with a classic story—the story similar to the dreams of several million American executives trapped right now in downtown office towers.

The story was of a longtime American resident who loved his native Greece and decided to lead some friends on a tour there.

The friends raved. This made the man wonder: Could he make a living doing just this?

After weeks of wondering and months of trial and error, he started the business. Years later, that business—the Greek travel agency Hellenic Adventures—is growing rapidly.

But when the public relations person pitched this classic story, which proves a mother's advice—"Do what you love; the money will follow"—the editor balked again and again. Why?

The problem wasn't that the story had no appeal. It was that the story was just a story to the editor, because he had never heard of Hellenic Adventures. How could he be sure the company was real and viable, his trust in me notwithstanding?

"I'm not sure I can believe in that company," he said to himself. "I've never heard of them."

What would have simplified the public relations person's job? Advertising. If that editor had seen Hellenic Adventures's ads (the company had not yet started frequent advertising) he would have said, "This is a real business, so this is a real story."

Advertising, in short, would have led to publicity. The elements of a marketing effort are not separate elements. They work together, often in surprising ways. Advertising is publicity; direct mail is advertising; everything mingles and commingles, and virtually everything, done properly, will contribute.

If you want more publicity, do more advertising.

The Essence of Publicity

At this writing, no magazine or newspaper suffers from being too interesting.

In a world deluged with communications, the task of creating an interesting weekly or monthly publication is daunting. With violent speed, editors are brought in and hurled out as increasingly strapped publications search for the formula.

Whatever the formula may be, there is one thing it is not. No publication will get anywhere by running business advertisements thinly disguised as articles.

Your typical press release, cleverly designed to get advertising without paying for it, will not work. In fact, the editors, who know their publication could use the advertising, will resent your effort. Transparent press releases also make their authors look naive and manipulative—an impression no one should make on any editor. The world is too small.

What editors *do* want is to make their publications interesting. They want their readers to say "Loved the article!"

So in efforts to publicize your service, never ask "What makes our service so good?" Instead, ask "What makes our service interesting to that publication's readers?"

If you want editors to help you, help them. Give them something interesting. Give them a story.

Inspiration from William F. Buckley

So all you need to do to generate a little publicity is to be a little interesting.

Great.

So you look around for a little while. And a little while longer. And longer. The next day, you sigh, "I'm not sure there is anything interesting about our company."

Look harder.

John McPhee wrote a fascinating book about oranges. (That's right: *oranges*.)

The TV journalist Harry Reasoner once narrated an enchanting minidocumentary about doors.

Robert Pirsig wrote a best-seller on motorcycle maintenance. Hundreds of thousands of people who never rode a motorcycle read it avidly.

There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject, someone once wrote. There is only an uninterested person.

William F. Buckley gave another meaning to this when someone asked him about his interviews on *Firing Line*. "What happens," the person asked Buckley, "when you get a guest who is not interesting?"

"That never happens," Buckley answered. "If you look deeply enough, ninety-nine out of a hundred people are interesting—and the one hundredth person is interesting because he isn't."

Look harder. The interest—and the story—are there.

Focus on Buying, Not Selling

Some marketing experts recommend that in creating a direct mail program, you should devote half your time to creating the reply form.

Most clients are surprised, if not shocked, when they hear this very revealing rule.

The rule is revealing because it suggests that most marketers spend too much effort on the sale—and too little on the "buy."

Think how often you have been virtually sold on something, but chose not to make the purchase because it was too hard to buy. The salesperson offered all sorts of options, for example, or made you worry about the value of extended warranty, or offered more complicated financing packages than you could not intelligently choose among. *The pro duct was too hard to buy*. Now, think of your opposite experiences. Something appealed to you—a little, not necessarily a lot—and the ease with which you could order, pay for, and receive the product ultimately led you to make the purchase.

Good marketing must focus on the buy. How clear is your offer? Can the prospects sample the service, thereby reducing their risk? How clear is the price? How easy is it to buy?

Make your service easy to buy.

The Most Compelling Selling Message

What sells?

The most compelling selling message you can deliver in any medium is not that you have something wonderful to sell.

It is: "I understand what you need."

The selling message "I have" is about you. The message "I understand" is about the only person involved in the sale who really matters: the buyer.

Find out what they want.

Find out what they need.

Find out who they are.

It will take extra time, but it can make the sale.

Don't sell your service. Sell your prospect.

What Blank Eyes Mean

A salesperson has something to sell you. "Blah, blah, blah," you hear.

He continues. Same thing. You hear the melody, but not the lyrics.

Eventually, you graciously thank him and promise you will get back to him.

Which, of course, you don't.

You know why his pitch failed. Because the person did not talk about *you*. His entire pitch was about *him* and what he had, not about you and what you need.

It was all about him. But what you cared about was you.

Do you know why *your* pitches fail, too?

Talk about him, not about you.

Presenting's First Rule: Imitate Dick

For fourteen months, I enjoyed the strange and wonderful experience of working with Dick Wilson.

Everyone should be so lucky.

Dick is a genius at presenting.

To appreciate his genius, let me set the stage: It is the wood-paneled living room in the historic Pillsbury mansion. Top executives from Musicland have come to Carmichael-Lynch Advertising to hear the agency's pitch. Dick, who will lead the creative presentation, is wearing a coat and tie, but still looks like he has just finished mowing the lawn. After the writer and art director have shown their ideas for Musicland's new TV commercials, Dick rises to summarize. His summary should take five minutes.

It takes forty. Dick emotes, rambles, enthuses. He swerves off on tangents from which even the Musicland execs try to rescue him. The clients are lost. Dick may be lost. But—and this is a huge but—we *never* take our eyes off him. It is not because of what Dick says; it is because of what he feels.

Dick *cares*. He believes in what he is saying, and he *cares*—about doing wonderful commercials that will help Musicland sell millions of records. And in an industry known for slickness, Dick is just Dick. Nothing is planned—how could such a presentation be planned? No clever references to tidbits he has learned about each Musicland executive. No fascinating creative-type tie, no affectations, no attitude—nothing the client might have expected from an award-winning creative director.

Dick won this and four other major presentations in succession, the best winning record in Twin Cities advertising, for four reasons.

He shattered the stereotype.

He never pretended.

He risked showing his true self.

And he cared passionately—and showed clients how much he cared.

You should have seen him.

You should copy him.

Mission Statements

Like movies, books, TV shows, and everything else, there are many bad mission statements. This does not mean that mission statements are inherently bad or that drafting one is foolish. A good one has value, if only to show employees the pot of gold at the rainbow's end.

But mission statements do not belong in your marketing communications. Mission statements tell people where you are going—your strategic goal—and good companies, like good generals, never alert their competitors to where they are going. What's more, a good mission statement describes the future, not the present—and prospects want to know who you are *right now*.

Write a mission statement, but keep it private.

What a Mission Statement Must Be—and Must Have

Make your mission statement specific. Tell employees and stakeholders exactly where to go. If you say, "We're going to San Francisco," people know where to head and can chart their progress. If you say, "We're going west," people may think they've