



NINE MUST-DO POSITIONING STEPS

Every professional or consultant knows that clients typically hire people they know, like and trust. But how do you build trust with strangers?

As Ralph Waldo Emerson's 150-year-old essay titled "Compensation" teaches, first you must give if you want to receive. The best positioning strategy for professional service firms is to build trust by giving away valuable information.

That's why professional service firm marketing works best when it demonstrates expertise by educating prospects, not asserting superiority through flashy brochures and Web sites.

Based on best practices research, here are 9 must-do positioning steps every professional service firm and technology service should take.

1. Identify the target market.

Find a potential market niche that will be profitable.

In today's market, clients demand specialists. You want fewer prospects to be interested in you, but you want them to be much more intensely interested. This requires focus. It doesn't mean you'll turn down a client who doesn't fit into your two or three chosen verticals - it simply means you won't be actively shaping your marketing message toward them.

Evaluate your business. Have you sold most of your products to golf-ball manufacturers, pet stores and electrical suppliers? Then those are the three places to start thinking. But if pet stores in general don't have the budget for your products, you'll need to look harder.

2. Make a promise.

Determine what promise you or your firm is making to your target market.

This includes your unique selling proposition: what you do, who you do it for and how you are unlike competitors -- all in 25 words or less. Are you willing to make a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee a part of that promise?

You need to decide what makes you different from everybody else, and you need to overcome fear of focus -- the desire to want to be everything to everybody.

People hire professionals who specialize. Very few people would hire a surgeon who says he can do everything from tonsillectomies to facelifts and open-heart procedures. When you're in pain, you want a specialist -- not just somebody who's "good with a knife."



3. Check your reflection.

Take a fresh look at your logo, letterhead, business cards, office space, wardrobe -- anything tangible that a prospect could use as a basis for an early opinion about you.

Design changes every few years. Take a hard look.

Do your printed materials look like they're stuck in the disco era? This is where it pays to overspend. There are five attributes that clients use to judge professionals, and appealing tangibles heads the list.

4. Create an educational web site.

Create an easy-to-update, database-driven Web site that demonstrates your competence, rather than asserts how great you are.

The Web site is the cornerstone of new marketing, and must not be a mere electronic brochure.

Your Web site is the silent salesperson that prospective clients visit before making the decision to grant you permission to meet.

I have information available on the most common blunders in Web design, and I share that with clients.

5. Determine proprietary process.

Create a proprietary problem-solving process that you name and protect by obtaining a trademark.

Your process should have a mysterious name that requires explanation. A proprietary process is not only a marketing asset that will allow you to charge more, but also will make your work less accidental and improve the quality of your service.

6. Conduct proprietary research.

Conduct research that you own.

Begin by choosing the three biggest problems your target clients face that your service can solve. What clients want to know most is how they stack up to their competition. Your specific answers will command client and media attention.

7. Create white papers or how-to articles.

Write articles on how clients can solve their biggest problems.

In essence, you are giving your insights away for free. These are used on the Web site and in the lead



generation efforts. You need to give away information on how to solve problems in general so clients will trust you enough to hire you to solve their specific problems.

8. Create an image folder.

Create an image folder that will not go out of date for a minimum of five years.

The folder needs to be appealing and should contain as few words as possible.

There are several techniques to ensure the folder has a long and useful shelf life, like not printing photos of people (fashions change) and phone numbers (so do area codes).

Next, create the adaptable contents for the folder. You may choose up to three target markets, and need materials to adapt to each one.

This allows you to project an image of a specialist with a specific process for each target client base.

9. Create a PDF of tips brochure.

Avoid printing a brochure if at all possible; instead create an electronic version that can be read by anyone with an e-mail address and free Adobe Acrobat software.

You can post the brochure on your Web site, e-mail it to clients and even use your own laser printer to create print-on-demand versions for Internet-averse potential clients.

As to the content, think guidebooks with tips rather than the traditional puff pieces.