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The Angle

Truth in Advertising: Supporting Your Claim

By Dan Logan

We all know that a critical messaging component of a good ad, brochure, or website is to answer the question 'Why should I do business with you?' While this is always important it is even more so for service brands. It's one thing to switch toothpaste brands with the hope of whiter teeth. After 90 days if you do not see a difference you are out \$10. But the process for evaluating a new healthcare plan, 401k plan, or technology platform is different and the stakes are much higher. If after 90 days the technology you implemented does not work as advertised you could be out more than your money - you could be out of a job or out of business. Good business people have learned to be skeptical and they will do their due diligence before they make a purchase decision.

It's easy to underestimate the importance of determining the benefit or solution a firm should highlight in its communications and providing evidence that supports the claim effectively. So how can you best support the claim that you're faster, cheaper, better, smarter, and easier to do business with than the other guy? How do you demonstrate to your business customers or prospects that you respect their intelligence, are sensitive to their time, and truly understand their business need? How do you credibly demonstrate that your product or service can help them grow their business, reduce costs, or increase customer satisfaction? Here are five suggestions that can help.

1. Review the competition - in terms of message and noise level - and put yourself in the shoes of the customer trying to make a decision.

Spend 30 minutes looking at print ads in business publications or trade journals and then look at the websites of some of these companies. What do you see? Who do you believe and why? For example in the *Wall Street Journal* this week you may have noticed an ad by US Trust. The ad talks about the mission of the company to deliver top-tier performance and innovation that is unbiased and in the best interests of clients. So how are they different than any other wealth management company and why should someone give them their hard earned money to invest? Because it's the company's mission? Because they claim they will act in my best interests? Where is the evidence to support this claim? Can you find it online and can a representative from the company answer this question if challenged?

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On the other hand when I see Harvard Pilgrim ads in the *Globe*, the *Boston Business Journal*, or on television I am given evidence that Harvard Pilgrim is dedicated to driving down the cost of health insurance by proactively helping people live healthier lives. The evidence is everywhere. Benefits like \$150 credit for joining a healthcare club are valuable and effective. I see the facts online and I see it in my office when associates walk in and ask for the form to apply for the credit. As a business owner and decision maker I believe Harvard Pilgrim is demonstrating to me that they respect my intelligence, my time, and my focus on managing healthcare costs.

2. Ask yourself for the most credible evidence you have to support your claim.

If a medical device company wants a physician or nurse to recommend its product to a patient, what evidence do they give to support their recommendation? In most instances evidence is not as simple as “whiter teeth.” If you want a physician to purchase your device you need to offer evidence on a variety of claims that cut across safety, better outcomes, and profit to their practice. Evidence of performance needs to be based on scientific fact, not clever before-and-after shots or deceptive testimonials that promise more hair, less fat, or freedom from pain.

The criteria for “credibility” vary a bit from industry to industry. Technology companies with an enterprise level offering need to provide evidence that they really do offer a better solution that is secure, scalable, and cost-effective in getting to the end benefit. Professional service firms may have to describe a better process, more experienced people, or expertise in a particular vertical with credible testimonials to support their story.

3. Choose evidence that is visually and verbally memorable, distinct, and relevant.

More often than not a businessperson, unlike an individual consumer, has to explain and justify a decision to make a big purchase or switch providers. The evidence they need must be brief, easy to understand, and true. Don’t underestimate the benefit of a simple visual or clean statement. For example, Wilmer Hale in a recent ad claims to be “counsel of choice for mergers and acquisitions.” The evidence they provide is the fact that they have done more than 900 M&A transactions with a total value in excess of \$500 billion since 2000. The numbers 900 and the \$500 billion capture attention. A firm looking for advice in this area might at least visit their website or call for more information.

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4. Position evidence so that it is highly visible.

A source of constant amazement is how often the most compelling evidence to support a claim is not emphasized in an ad or highlighted on a website but buried where no one can or will find it. Businesses often overestimate the relative importance of their product or service and how long a prospect will give them to tell their story. If you have good evidence to support your claim say it and show it early and often in the marketing, communication, and sales process. Do not leave it as a big reveal in the end – chances are you have already lost the audience.

5. Make it easy for clients who have experienced your service to quickly recount key support points if they were asked for a referral from a friend.

There is nothing more credible than a satisfied client making a referral. We all know from experience that when making a referral you rarely say “Call XYZ.” As the referrer you often feel compelled to support the referral – what do you point to? How do you support your recommendation? As a company, it is critical that the points provided in marketing are aligned with the actual experience of clients and that they believe them.

I was recently asked for a referral for an executive search firm. In my recommendation it was easy for me to turn to a firm with a truly unique process, a commitment to turning over a lot of stones, and deep industry expertise. Not just because that is what they say in their communications but also because that is what was promised and I experienced it when I worked with them.

Your company may offer better pricing, expertise and experience, but the burden of proof is on marketing and communicating the evidence. Clear, believable messaging is needed to support your claims and encourage prospects to look further into your company and eventually choose you for business. Keep the customer in mind, examine the evidence and make it visible.

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