

marketer

Are You Looking Through the Wrong End of the Telescope?

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This article is about how you can communicate in a far more persuasive way. Let's start with the best advice for professional services marketing, something that's been in every issue of *Marketer* and certainly in the air for the last year. That advice is—okay, everyone at once: Find out what your client needs. Act on that.

We are all convinced that we *do* focus on the client. And yet... To make my point, first I ask you to take any three proposal cover letters, memos, or e-mails currently on your desk. Now look at the first sentence. It's a safe bet that "I" or "we" starts that sentence, and that the same first-person pronouns pepper the paragraph and page.

What was that about listening to the client's needs? Oh, dear. But it's not that you are self-centered; you're just selling too hard, speaking too early and too eagerly.

Here, for instance, are examples of marketing communications; in this case, about sustainable design services. Recently, to convince a client that their language did not sufficiently differentiate them from anyone else with the same service offering, we looked at the words that they and several of their key competitors use on their various Web sites to describe what they do. We lined up these sentences anonymously on one piece of paper and asked them to identify their words as well as the other guys'. Here's some of what we showed them:

- "We know how to implement sustainable design in many ways, and we have the resources and experience to do it..."
- "We approach green issues holistically and conceptually, building on our legacy of energy-conserving, environmentally-conscious design."
- "We must lead our industry away from practices that borrow against the future..."
- "In all our work, we strive to maximize the use of solar energy, natural ventilation, and daylighting..."

None of the principals in our client's firm (including the marketing director) identified their own statement, and no one attributed the competitors' correctly, either. The real point of that game was not to prove that it's hard to write effective marketing copy, but rather to show that even experienced marketing people forget to focus on the clients' needs and the world in which those clients navigate. Thus they write about themselves.

One solution: The first word in any outbound communication—the word that will surely catch the reader's eye and appreciation—needs to be "you" (or some close approximation).

Here's another solution: Shift the focus from yourself to those who will make it possible for you to achieve what you want. Identify those people and provide to them what they need, in order to make this happen for you. The visual that accompanies this article depicts the concept: You are at the narrow point of radiating circles. If you want to do something for you, that's pretty easy: You go do it.

"Consider the effect on others of what you want, make sure that the effect benefits them as much as you, and then communicate your desire and ideas."

The next ring includes people who are close to you, your personal and family relationships. They don't need much convincing when you ask them to do something for you. But it becomes more challenging to convince the subsequent ring, which includes the various communities where you are involved, to do what you ask. This is where you find your business colleagues, individual clients, and the formal or informal groups that define your daily life—for instance, professional, educational, religious, cultural, and ethnic organizations. If you want something to happen for you vis-à-vis any of the groups, you must recognize and address what those constituencies need. If you give, you may get.

