

Writing & Strategy



IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 1

STRATEGY SHOULD SELL

Walking the walk is not good enough. You gotta talk the talk too.

PAGE 1

WRITERS BLOCK

Five ways to get past whatever is stopping you from communicating a strategy so that it does sell.

PAGE 2

WHAT IS THIS?

A brief overview of what you're reading and why it matters.

PAGE 4

ABOUT ME

Who is Randall Cronk and why should you care?

THE WEB ADDRESS

www.greatwriting.com

Why talking a good game is just as important as playing one

Taking Strategy to Market

Great strategy and great tactical execution are keys to success in marketing. These are truths that few professional marketers would dispute. One of the signs of a great company is that you can see the company's strategy just by being on the receiving end of its tactics. Mention the names Dell, Wal-Mart, Toyota, Apple, Google — and their strategies are as immediately recognizable as the names themselves. In fact, many would argue that these companies' strategies have become an indispensable and inextricable part of their branding.

Customers know what to expect from these companies — whether that's low prices, super-reliable products, cool cutting edge technology, or, as in the case of Google, highly relevant online searches. Customers are making easy, conscious, and logical choices — made easier and more logical by the companies themselves. These companies don't hide what they are doing to get customers' business. They shout it from the rooftops. Having a great strategy is critical. The ability to execute on that strategy is also critical. So too is making the strategy itself part of marketing message.

Conversely, look at companies with poor results. Their strategies are difficult for outsiders to recognize. What's GM's strategy? What's Gateway's? Or K-Mart's? Chances are good that if you live in Jet Blue's service area, you know what its strategy is (getting the basics right). But what about United's or American's?

Within most organizations, decision-makers can continually be heard hyping their marketing strategies — usually to each other. But what about the customer? Would it make a difference if more strategy content were included in messages designed to get customers to buy?

Sun Microsystems is an interesting case because it is a company that continually announces its strategy — yet has been in the doldrums for years.

(Continues on Pg. 3)

5 Ways to deal with it

Got Writers Block?

Examples of your thinking, as in articles, white papers, case studies and the like, can be the most cost-effective way for clients, business partners, and even your own staff to get an impression of whether your mission makes sense. In an era of Google-driven searches, both quality and quantity count — and so does demonstrating that you're not just using different words to say what everyone else is saying.

In any field, you know you're good at what you do if you make it look easy. But strategy is not writing. Here are five ways to make writing easier for people routinely great at doing strategy:

(Continues on Pg. 2)



WHAT IS THIS?

W&S ISSUE #1

Welcome to the premier issue of *Writing & Strategy*, a newsletter about writing in the development and practice of business strategy. It is based on the premise that for organizations to succeed they must communicate their business strategies effectively both internally and to the marketplace — and that they need to put the resources and processes in place to do that. My goal is to help my readers make their own strategy content more compelling, easier to create, and more highly differentiating.

Randy Cronk
rc@greatwriting.com

Got Writers Block?

(Continued from Pg. 1)

#1 Turn the topic inside out

Two writers discuss how to defeat complexity. One writes about simplifying the organization to focus on core profit-making activities (an inside topic). The other writes about targeting high-value customers (an outside topic). One consulting firm recently published an article on passive/aggressive organizations (an inside topic). Another writes about passive/aggressive customers and how to deal with them. Once you write the article for one context, much of the creative work has been done for the other context.

#2. Make the problem a solution

Every problem is a solution to some other problem — and very often to multiple problems. For example, re-regulation is an opportunity to achieve differentiation in energy marketing. Once you've got that core problem-solution-problem relationship, most of the creative work is done. What's left is

about why that relationship is true and what to do about it.

#3 Make a consumer topic a B2B topic (or vice versa)

Corporate buyers are human too. Much of the same factors (technology, psychology, etc.) that influence consumer behavior are also at work in B2B, but differently. A recent paper posted to a strategy consulting firm's website talks about how to model consumer interaction styles as a way to enhance marketing effectiveness. Why not write an article that uses much of this same thinking to enhance *B2B* marketing effectiveness?

#4 Reverse engineer a strategy

Most products and services exist to enable a strategy — for the supplier, for the customer, and often for both — even if the strategy has not been explicitly written down someplace. Look at an emerging market or niche and describe why the winning players are successful and the losing players are not. A recent article that might have taken this path discusses fact-based marketing in sub-

scription services like telephony and IP. The thesis: use data generated by the service fabric itself to fortify the customer relationship. The tools to do this already existed years before the article was written — although many vendors have only recently started to put strategy wrappers around the marketing of those tools.

#5 Give away the store

Both tech and strategy firms are typically reluctant to “give away the store” — so they often leave the best ideas on the shelf when writing or else sanitize ideas to the point that all the life goes out of them. You should not hold back. In these days of increasingly commoditized information, your best advantage is to say something first and well.

As these techniques illustrate, writing about strategy is a hybrid practice. It's as much about target selection, context, and process as it is about syntax, cadence, and structure. And as in any practice, a great result doesn't just “happen.” It requires a conscious application of key principles.

Taking Strategy to Market

Continued from Pg. 1)

Its most recent strategy rendition was marked by the company's decision to give away its software for free à la Linux. If Red Hat, a key player in the Linux space, can make money on free software selling value adding support and consulting services, why can't Sun? The problem from a strategy content point of view is lack of consistency. Saying the same thing over and over again until it sinks in is one of the most fundamental principles in marketing communications. Yet, Sun shifts its strategy almost every year and even when it does settle on a strategy, the strategy is ambiguous. Is it a Red Hat strategy or a Gillette ("make money on the blades") strategy? Perhaps it's a great technology experience strategy like Apple. If you can't say what your strategy is, customers can't either. And they will not have a clear reason to buy.

Get yourself tested

Of course, it's possible that the reason many less-than-successful companies don't talk up their strategies is the same reason they don't perform well — and that's because they don't have a strategy to talk up. Their strategy is not bad. It is not inconsistent. It simply doesn't exist.

One way to be sure you *do* have a strategy is to see if your customers can tell you what it is — and that's easy to find out. Perform a limited market study — very quick and simple. Select a representative sample of your intended customers (say, about 30 or so at random) and ask them to tell you why they would buy from you. If they can't tell you something as basic as that, then you have a problem. You may have a communications issue, or there may be something more fundamentally wrong — like poor product performance. These issues will certainly undermine your business — which is reason enough to identify and deal with them. They may also be undermining your ability to communicate a clear consistent strategy, or it may be that

the strategy content itself is what's missing.

A brief market audit like this won't tell you very much. But what it will tell you is extremely important. It may also provide you with some needed political cover so that you can give others the bad news (if there is bad news to give) without getting fired.

No CEO in the world will admit that he or she doesn't have a strategy to be successful. But if outsiders can't say what the strategy is, then it's a good bet that one of three things is happening. First, as just mentioned, the company may have no strategy. More likely, just like Sun, it has several strategies competing for people's attention. Or what the company really has is a strategy for tactical execution — like a cost-cutting strategy (which is what GM has). Tactical execution strategies are very prevalent at technology organizations where success on that level can easily become a business priority all by itself regardless of whether the connection between technical attributes and business strategy is clear. Whatever the case, the fact remains that it's very difficult for people to admit they don't have a strategy for success. It's even more difficult to tell one's boss. And if there are multiple competing strategies — or tactical strategies — being continually thrown around at internal meetings then it's virtually impossible for someone to stand up and say, "No, actually, we don't have a strategy for the business."

So, let your target customers be the ones to break that news for you. Put the target on them.

Make strategy content work

Companies invest a lot in their business strategies, so having those strategies pull double duty as message content is added return on investment. Bringing that content into the tactical phase also gives companies a head start on ads, white papers, brochures, and other key communications elements. It also lowers the risk that execution of those elements will fail, since you're delivering content

pretty much "as is" rather than asking people outside your core team to reinvent content all over again. Ask any marketer — the gap between strategy and execution can be huge — and the cause of significant delays and missteps because text intended to make a point during an internal strategy meeting simply fails as marketing copy for public consumption. The faster and more seamless you can convert strategy to tactics, perhaps by bringing in writers earlier or writers who are more adept at strategy, the lower the risk.

Of course, words are not the only form of strategy content, and actions can certainly speak louder. Apple opened its retail stores to withering industry criticism — yet, that move has proved to be a very compelling way to communicate the experience at the core of the Apple value proposition. Toyota's reliability message is conveyed through word of mouth: "Ask someone you know who drives one." These companies (and many others) prove that actions really can speak louder than words — *provided the actions have something relevant to say.*

But even companies with immense resources don't ignore the most obvious way to convey a message — which is also the least complex and the least expensive way — which is simply to *say* it. Wal-Mart says its famous tag-line "Always low prices." again and again. Those same words are probably at the top of every Wal-Mart marketing manager's slide deck.

Time for translation from strategy to execution: zero.

Achieving that kind of clarity in a few simple words looks easy, but is almost always very difficult. It's especially difficult for technology companies who see plenty of nuance between what they do and what competitors do — and spend countless hours and thousands of marketing dollars trying to make that nuance meaningful to customers. That kind of detail-oriented technology shootout almost never works. In the case of business-to-business marketing, a far bet-



ter approach is to present the big picture. Often that's a picture of the *customer's* marketing challenge and your solution as a strategy for customer success. That's right: your strategy is to enable your customer's strategy — which, by the way, they may not have articulated clearly either.

So, how do you sell a better mousetrap to someone in the mouse catching business? Not by recounting all the mousetrap's innumerable features and benefits — many of which are of interest mainly to other mousetrap builders. You sell it by presenting a strategic advantage to mouse catchers. That's not to say the technical proof points aren't important; but you can't expect the customer to connect the dots for you. That's *your* strategy content, and *yours* to provide. In fact, if you don't provide it, I would be seriously skeptical about whether you understand my business at all and whether what you provide is really a solution.

Solve the customer's problem first

You can find many examples of this methodology in action at successful technology organizations:

- An IPTV technology vendor wishes to introduce its newest system to cable companies and telcos. Before selling the system's superior technical attributes (which are many), it makes the case that only seamless convergence of communications and entertainment will ultimately win the day in the space.
- A maker of customer service software in the electric utility industry wants to position itself in the newly deregulated

market. Before selling the interoperability of its modules (and the XML/middleware-based approach that provides it) the company offers a far more compelling business case: that tailored billing will be a key differentiator of commodity sellers.

- One of the world's largest intelligence agencies wishes to promote its new proprietary cryptography system to contractors and to other government agencies. The system has many state-of-the-art features but the banner under which the system is marketed gets right to the point: "Information assurance enhances technology advantage." It may not be "Always low prices" but it does address an overriding strategic concern of the agency's customers.

Once you've got this approach mastered, actual tactical execution becomes almost second nature — and sets you up to rapidly solve a lot of marketing "services" issues that are more tactical. Take the perennial PR challenge of placing a company-contributed article in a magazine. If what you have in hand is truly strategy content then, by definition, you have already focused on a problem facing a broad swath of a publication's readers. That immediately makes your articles much more "pitchable" than if they were just about how great your product is.

Your program is also much more scalable in its ability to produce lots of white papers, brochures, and case studies quickly and at relatively low cost. By writing the strategy content first, and by making it about the customer, you make what you are saying instantly relevant and intellec-

tually interesting. The "good stuff"—the part that makes your content worth reading on both sides of the sales transaction — is easily transferable across document types and writers.

With all the talk about strategy in marketing today, it is easy to overlook the fact that there may be little real strategy content in what is actually going out to the target audience. So ask your audience this question: "Why *would* you buy from us?" If customers don't understand a clear, compelling reason to buy from you then they probably won't.

ABOUT RANDALL CRONK

Randall Cronk is an expert in writing persuasively about the complex systems, products, and services of technology focused organizations and the business strategies that drive them.

Based in downtown Boston, he has served over 200 clients, holds an MBA from Clark University, and has been a full-time writer and consultant to high tech organizations for 25 years. Mr. Cronk's writing practice reflects his background as a marketing and public relations strategist for Hill and Knowlton and Regis McKenna, both firms where he served as vice president before launching his own company in 1990.

He may be reached at
rc@greatwriting.com.