

Welcome Matters

Do your employees understand that marketing is a key part of everyone's job? Do you?

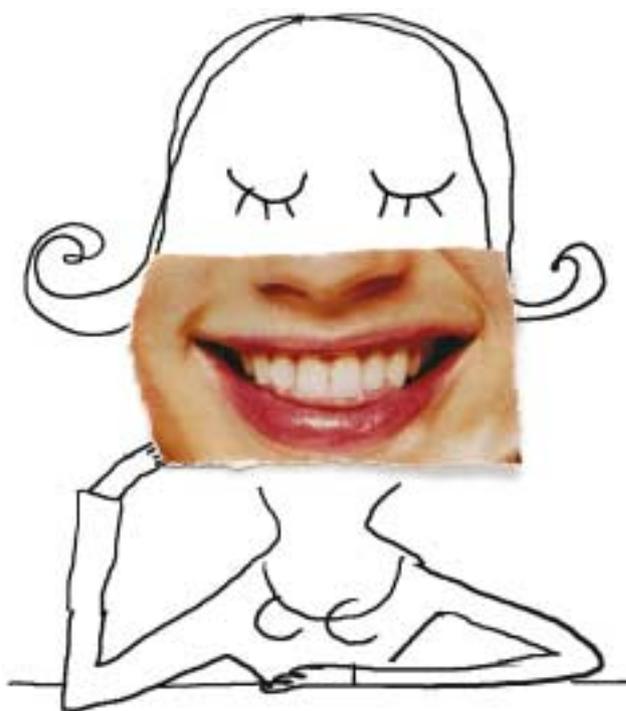
Mark Merenda

WHEN YOU THINK of marketing, that is, if you think of marketing, you probably envision something that takes place outside your office: seminars, advertising, press releases, speaking engagements, and the like. But you might be surprised to know that some of the most important and effective marketing activities take place right in your office.

Most of us view our office almost exclusively in terms of its administrative function. The office is where the work gets done—where we shuffle paper and joke with our coworkers. What's not well recognized is that from the point of view of your clients, or potential clients, your office is an experience.

In their book, *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business School Press), B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore make the point that work is theater and every business a stage. So, what does your client experience when he enters your office?

One of my clients had an office where you had to walk down a corridor to reach the reception area. In the process, you passed two empty offices. Imagine a potential client's impressions by the time he's seated in the conference room:



“Things aren't going too well here. Better start looking around.” (By the way, my advice to that client was to close the doors to the empty rooms and mount a sign that read “Computer Lab.”)

One of the key concepts of marketing is “points of contact.” A point of contact is any interaction your firm has with the public, whether in person, on the telephone, or in written communications. Every point of contact is an opportunity to form, or not form, a relationship. At Smart Marketing we recognize that our relationship

with potential clients begins when they arrive at our door. We greet each of our visitors with a freestanding sign in the reception area that reads “Smart Marketing welcomes Mr. and Mrs. James Smith, date X.” The materials for the sign can be purchased at most office-supply stores for less than \$85. Many clients tell us that the special attention we give them is why they choose us over the competition.

Not long ago I was in a restaurant in Minneapolis with a colleague. We were in town on business and went to the restaurant because it was close to the hotel. The table at which we were seated was not a very good one. It was in the middle of the floor, close to the swinging door of the kitchen. Also, the restaurant looked a bit too trendy for my taste. As we sat there trying to make up our minds whether to stay or leave,

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I can make a good case that the receptionist is one of the most important persons in your firm. In fact, for many people who deal with your firm, she is the firm. She's either helpful or she's not. She has a smile in her voice or she doesn't

our waitress approached.

"Good evening, have you ever been to Zelo before?" she asked.

"No, this is our first time," I answered.

"You're going to love it," she said enthusiastically. "It's a great restaurant. The food is terrific."

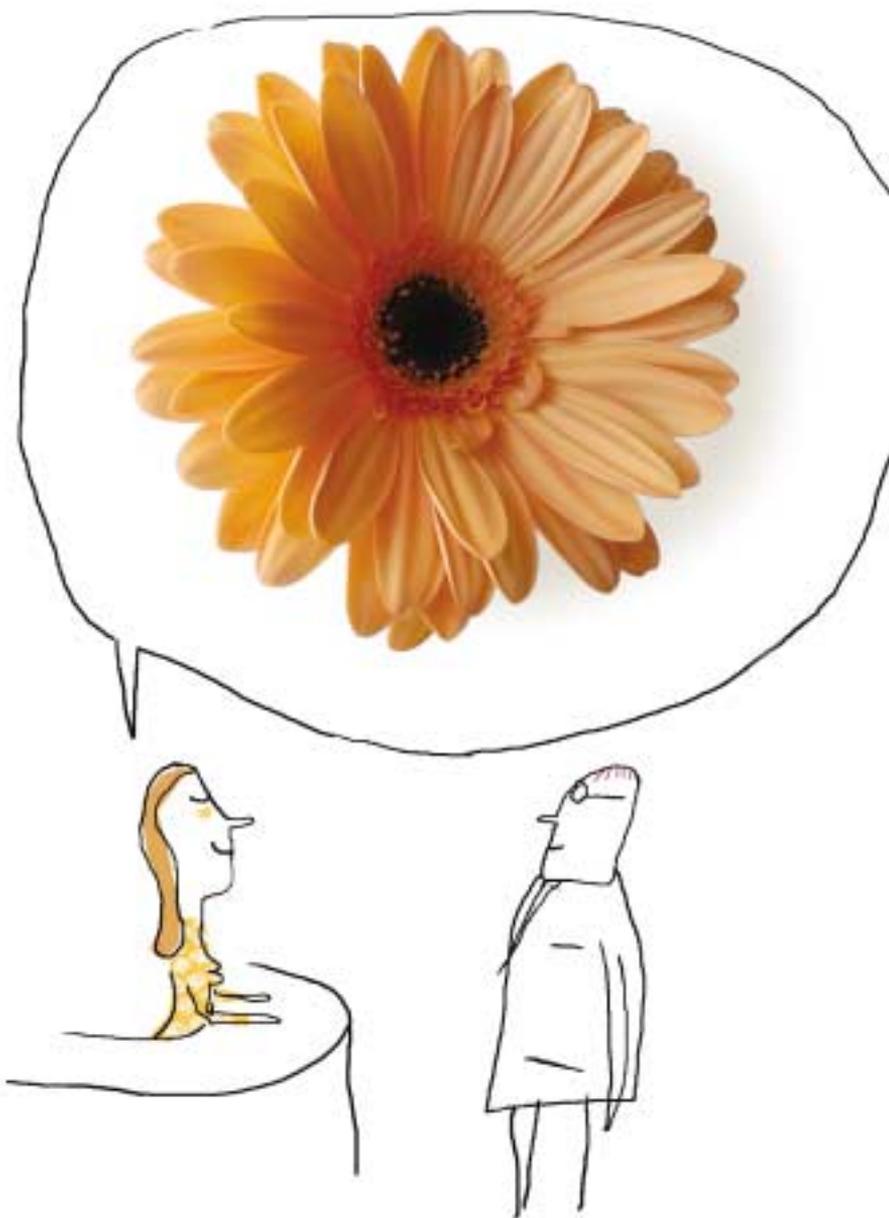
Okay, I'm staying. That kind of endorsement from an employee convinced me that I was in for a great experience.

In his book *Marketing Your Services: A Step-by-Step Guide for Small Businesses and Professionals* (John Wiley), Anthony

O. Putman states that each company has both an internal and an external mission. He stresses that your internal mission has to be in alignment with your external mission.

To me, that means three things: First, every person in your company has to be aware of, and work at, the marketing component of his job. Second, each person has to know how his job contributes to the external mission. And third, he has to be empowered to further that mission. In other words, your employees have to know not only the "what" but also the "why" of the company's mission—and they have to be able to do something about it.

Do the staff people at your firm understand what the mission is and how their jobs contribute to that mission? Do they understand that marketing is not a department? Do you?



What happens when a person calls your office? Because most of my clients are professional financial advisers and I conduct telephone consultations for prospective new clients on a regular basis, I probably place 20 to 25 telephone calls a week to advisers' offices. Let me tell you, the experience is horrifying. If financial advisers, as a group, are ever in a position where they have to rely on their staff's telephone skills for income, they would be better-off filing for bankruptcy now.

Here's a set of circumstances I run into regularly: An automated voice answers, tells me that this is the Smith Financial Advisory Firm, and says that if I know my party's extension, I should enter it now. If I don't know it, I should consult the directory. Or I can hold the line, and someone

will help me. So I hold the line, and the next thing I hear is, “You have reached Amy, the receptionist. I’m away from my desk right now, so please leave a message.”

Well, I don’t want to leave a message for Amy; so I hang up and call back. This time I consult the directory and punch in the number for the adviser. He or she never answers. I leave a voice mail message. The end result: I’m tired and frustrated, and I’ve made two long-distance calls. If I were a potential client trying to make an appointment, I’d give up.

I once conducted a series of seminars on estate planning for an adviser. We invested thousands of dollars and much effort to promote the seminars. But when people called to make a reservation, they had to go through five menu options to reserve a place. Needless to say, the seminars were not well attended. Needless to say, the adviser did not blame himself.

If the goal of your marketing is to establish a relationship with potential clients (and it should be), what sort of message are you delivering to your callers? How much of a relationship do you expect them to form with an answering machine?

Maybe you have a live receptionist. Does the following conversation ever occur?

“Smith Financial Advisory Firm.” (Note: no greeting, no welcome, no smile in the voice, no “How can I help you?”)

“Is John Jones available?”

“I’ll check. Who’s calling, please?”

“Mr. Potential Client”

“And what is this in reference to, Mr. Client?”

“It’s about how I’m trying to give him my business.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Mr. Jones is in a meeting right now. Would you like his voice mail?”

Sometimes I just want to bang my head against the wall. Does your receptionist know enough to offer her own help, or to schedule an immediate appointment, or even to interrupt you? Is your receptionist capable of making a sales pitch for you as an adviser or for your firm?

I can make a good case that the receptionist is one of the most important persons in your firm. In fact, for many people who deal with your firm, she is the firm. The re-

ceptionist’s voice is the first one potential clients hear; her face, the first one they see. She’s either helpful or she’s not. She has a smile in her voice or she doesn’t. She’s empowered to help callers, or she’s simply a robot relaying them into various voice mail boxes.

Your receptionist can only excel, however, if you set the right tone. It all comes down from the top. You have to demonstrate a friendly, welcoming, helpful attitude. You have to make such an attitude part of your company culture. If your attitude is that the clients and other callers are a pain in the neck, everyone in your company will reflect that attitude, I promise you.

So it’s up to you to select and/or train your personnel accordingly. If you hire your receptionist based on her filing skills and pay her \$20,000 a year, you’re going to get what you pay for: a \$20,000-a-year file clerk.

Here in Naples, Fla., where I live and work, there’s a five-star Ritz-Carlton resort hotel. Like many before me, I’m always amazed at the quality of service associated with Ritz-Carlton hotels. And I have seen the little wallet cards that Ritz-Carlton employees carry expressing the company philosophy and policies. Perhaps the most striking policy is this one: when a Ritz-Carlton guest reports a problem or request to an employee—any employee—that employee then “owns” the problem or request and is both empowered and required to see that it’s resolved to the guest’s satisfaction within 30 minutes.

So if you tell your bellman that your air-conditioning is not working, it’s not his job to simply put you through to engineering. It’s his job to see that your air-conditioning gets fixed. If you ask a maid for a pitcher of lemonade, it’s not her job to tell you to call room service. It’s her job to make sure you get lemonade within 30 minutes.

Similarly, it shouldn’t be your receptionist’s job to put people’s telephone calls through to your voice mail. It should be her job to help them get what they want. But she can only do that if you empower her to do so and if you convey the attitude that helping callers get what they want is the job of everyone in your office. Is that how things work at your firm? **WM**

THE PROBLEMS FINANCIAL ADVISERS TACKLE AS they help clients manage their assets are complex. A ready solution in one area can create problems in another. During the year, *WEALTH MANAGER* offers many perspectives on the choices available to advisers and their clients. But there’s always more to the story.

And for that we look to you. No one

has a clearer understanding of the business of financial planning than the folks on the front line—advisers and the industry professionals who work with them to sort out the pros and cons of various strategies and business practices.

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