

HOT BUTTON MARKETING

MAKE YOUR MARKETING INVESTMENT PAY

By Dale Williamson



ABSTRACT

When developing new marketing programs, it is essential that your investment be as effective as possible. You may be tempted to focus on the tools themselves—the PR, sales literature, media campaign, etc. But if those tools don't appeal to prospects personally, you can experience marketing's double whammy: Your materials may not work effectively just when your company needs them most, and some of your budget for marketing will be wasted.

This white paper can help you avoid those pitfalls. It presents a technique that can increase your materials' appeal to newly-emerging prospects at their gut level. This technique can be used to help develop or refine a product, or to increase appeal in a new market, but it is especially suited to expanding your slice of the pie within existing markets. Short case studies demonstrate how to use this technique, and what you'll get out of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dale Williamson has 35 years of experience in marketing. He developed promotional materials for such firms as Alcoa, Calgon, Dow Corning, and Westinghouse before becoming advertising manager for a major manufacturing company. He moved to Oregon to become marketing communications manager for a telecommunications technology company. In 1985 he founded MarCom, a marketing and communications consulting firm. Williamson has developed strategic and tactical marketing plans, tools and programs for over 40 businesses in the U.S. and Canada. He holds a B.S. in Graphic Arts Management from Carnegie Mellon University.

GO FOR THE HOT BUTTON.

A MarCom client, the president of a multi-million-dollar corporation, enrolled in a “marketing for executives” course at a respected business college. As part of the course, each student was assigned a local business in need of marketing help. This executive drew an entrepreneurial manufacturer who had developed a new way to resole worn shoes. The product eliminated glue, by substituting a sticky-backed sole with a paper covering. All a cobbler had to do was shave the original sole, pull off the paper, slap on the new sole, trim, and the job was done.

What’s the benefit? Saves time? Saves money?

But this corporate marketing student thought, “Why not ask a cobbler?” So he paid his local cobbler a visit and asked what the instant resole’s benefit might be.

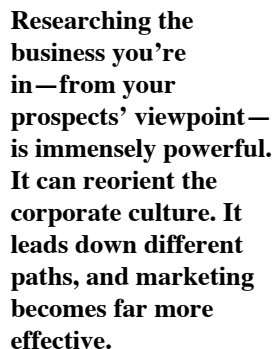
The cobbler held out his hands. They were cracked and bleeding. “I’m a fairly wealthy man,” he said, “but I’m so ashamed of my hands, I can’t even take my wife to the symphony without wearing gloves. Do you know what causes this? Glue!”

DON’T GUESS, DISCOVER.

The fledgling manufacturer wasn’t in the resole manufacturing business. He wasn’t even in the save-time-and-money business. From the market’s viewpoint, he was in the finger healing business!

This kind of insight doesn’t come from internal market planning meetings. It doesn’t come from creative teams brainstorming communications platforms. It can’t be extracted from industry statistics or survey data. It rarely comes from polling the sales force. It can only be gleaned by asking the customers themselves. Personally.

Researching the business you’re in—from your prospects’ viewpoint—is immensely powerful. It can reorient the corporate culture. It leads down different paths, and marketing becomes far more effective.



DON'T LEAD WITH THE PRODUCT.

The manufacturer of a software-driven office machine had developed a brochure which—like many brochures and data sheets—featured its product's newly introduced, high technology capabilities. A savvy marketing manager suspected his prospects might be more interested in their own problems, than in his company and its new product. So he hired MarCom to re-do the brochure.

When you interview existing customers, you are talking with people who've verified—through their accounts payable departments—that they are representative of sales you'll be able to close.

We asked for a list of his customers, representative of the kinds of customers he most wanted. This list was to contain customers in all markets and industries—commercial, medical, government—regardless of how disparate their needs might seem. After introductions, we phoned and interviewed these customers.

In this case, not a single interviewee was initially interested in the machine's cutting-edge technologies. Throughput-per-dollar is easy to calculate for any such business machine. How that's accomplished is, from a new prospect's viewpoint, almost irrelevant.

What all prospects initially wanted was not a machine which would meet their needs for years to come. What they wanted was a consultant who would craft a solution to meet today's need at the lowest possible price—with a clear upgrade path as a hedge against future needs.

Even your most technically- or financially-oriented prospects are making their purchase decisions for subjective, personal reasons. If you understand and feature these, your marketing tools will become much more productive.

Prospects were fed up with salespeople trying to shoehorn their particular machines into the prospect's unique situation. Prospects wanted someone who would listen, and then offer them honest advice. They viewed this company as the only vendor in the industry who was taking this approach.

This is an incredibly powerful position. No matter what industry they were in, all prospects had a common priority. And this company was the only competitor seen as meeting this most critical, across-the-board need!

The most powerful marketing materials feature buyers' concerns over product features or benefits.

So MarCom recreated the brochure. We removed the focus from the product and its technology. Instead, we featured the company's consultative approach. We softened the graphics, switching from a high-tech look to a warmer, more personal feel. We ran only one photo of the product, in a small size, on the last spread—and then only to assure prospects that it really did exist.

This may surprise you. Whenever we've done this kind of research, every customer we've talked with, regardless of their job function or industry, had the same priority—one hot button!

Management took both brochures—the product-and-technology based original, and the new needs-based brochure—to a major trade show. The more personal, research-based selling tool generated more interest than the technically-oriented piece, to quote the company's marketing manager, “By an order of magnitude!”

BELIEVE WHAT YOU HEAR.

A large electronics manufacturing company invented a machine, for its own use, which could revolutionize part of their industry. They decided to patent and sell it.

Small components—resistors, transistors, inductors, etc.—are normally placed by automated machinery. However, large components called “odd forms,” such as big capacitors or transformers, can't be managed by standard board-stuffing machines. Odd forms must either be placed by hand, with all the costs and vagaries associated with manual labor, or they must be installed by specialized equipment, custom-built for a particular circuit board. Such equipment typically costs millions and can only be justified for extremely long runs.

So this manufacturer developed an odd form board stuffing machine based on a software-controlled robot. The machine could be reconfigured to stuff a different circuit board, simply by changing the software and the components available to the robot.

When doing hot button interviews, talk with customers in all markets. That way, your message will appeal in all markets, and won't prove inappropriate later.

MarCom talked personally with a variety of managers and executives familiar with capital equipment purchases, and uncovered several important considerations, including:

- It doesn't initially matter what the machine does! Capital equipment investments are judged primarily by which will contribute the most to the bottom line.
- The machine had to pencil out better than manual labor, and had to pay back its investment within two years.
- New capital equipment designs are a risk, and can be career-busters for managers who recommend them if they fail to perform as expected. *The research showed that a robust service organization is essential.*
- Capital equipment decisions are made in the boardroom. The manufacturer's salesperson could not be present, so we had to prepare for an "absentee close."

The decision was made to proceed. The engineers doubled the speed of the machine so it would pencil out better than manual labor. MarCom prepared a brochure which featured cost-justification over function—and which gave the prospect a tool to "sell up" within his organization, without our salesperson present.

We involved the press, and created so much excitement that 15 verticals covered the technology, 7 ran feature stories, and the premier publication made it a cover story.

We designed and constructed a booth, took the machine to trade shows, and developed a questionnaire to prequalify visitors right in the booth. By the end of a show, we knew:

- What problem each prospect was facing, personally, that the new odd form board stuffing machine could solve.
- Whether the prospect had a budget to solve the problem, what that budget was, and how many machines the prospect would need.

It is possible to gather more than business cards at a trade show. Research right on the show floor can tell you who will buy, when, and why.

- Whether the prospect had a deadline, by which the problem had to be solved.
- Who the other decision makers were, if any, who would have to sign off on the purchase.
- Whether the prospect had checked out any alternatives and who those “competitors” were.

The product introduction was an enormous success. However, management decided not to fund a service organization until machines were actually in the field.

As the research had predicted, this put managers, who would be recommending this equipment to their boards, at personal risk. One by one, interested prospects visited the company, examined the prototype, and postponed their orders. Not a single machine was ever sold.

What you need is a genuine, heartfelt understanding of how prospects are feeling.



Granting an in-depth personal interview is a valuable gift from a customer or prospect. It is time consuming. It must be treated with gratitude and respect.



WHAT CAN YOUR CUSTOMERS TELL YOU?

A major software developer asked MarCom to research relevant markets, to find out what motivates managers to become prospects. The goal was to develop the most potent possible theme—a theme on which we could base all sales materials. Based on what we learned, here are the kinds of things your customers could reveal:

How you can motivate people to become prospects:

We now know what situation a prospect is in, that causes him or her to start becoming interested in this type of product in the first place. There is something all neophyte prospects are trying to accomplish—a consistent personal goal—on which we can now focus to grab their attention.

What concerns you will have to dispel:

When prospects become interested in a product, there are often worries that get in their way. From the research, we now know what fears we must address and dispel—up front—if we want interested managers to inquire.

Interview techniques drawn from the *Sandler Selling System* or Neil Rackham’s *SPIN Selling* can be especially useful for understanding the common personal issues which are driving your prospects.



Which challenges you should help prospects meet:

Managers in this situation all face common challenges. We now know which challenges are most important—from our prospects’ viewpoint—that we can legitimately offer to help them overcome.

What features are most important to emerging prospects:

Features don't generate prospects. Prospects only become interested in features after they're interested in the product. However, there may be a small subset of features which do intrigue prospects at the outset. We now know which those are, and we can lead with them.

Where you can find such prospects:

We discovered how neophyte prospects initially become aware of such products. We now know the best ways to reach such people, what keywords they search on, which marketing tools are more or less cost-effective, and why.

How to leverage your insight:

This particular research was designed to guide marketing efforts. Its key application was a message and strategy to guide marketing and selling tools for that product in that market. We developed this creative platform as well.

If you need to know how products are actually being used, or what features are needed, those can be identified too. Be specific about what you need to know, and how you will use the information to benefit your company.

MarCom’s website is at www.marcom-inc.com. You can e-mail us at info@marcom-inc.com, or phone 503-631-7640.

It may be helpful to use a researcher who doesn't have a vested interest in product features. The power comes from understanding your customers. Personally.

There is little value in research for its own sake. Deployment is part of the task.