

## Messaging in Clinical Research Marketing Communications

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Sally Jones handles marketing communications for Acme Clinical Research. She communicates regularly with sponsors and CROs. She rarely heard back from them, but now that she has read this article, many respond with study opportunities for her site. Perhaps this article can help *you* with *your* marketing communications.

Clinical research involves organizations of various types: study sponsors, research sites, CROs and other solution providers. Research sites market their services to sponsors and CROs. CROs market their services to study sponsors. Solution providers market their products and services to sponsors, sites and CROs. Study sponsors do not market their services to other clinical research organizations, but they do market their studies to sites.

In this article, the term "product" refers to products and services and the term "solution provider" is used for all product providers, as well as study sponsors.

### The Purpose of Marketing Communications

Marketing can be divided into business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing, but the real differentiator is the significance of the decision. When the purchasing decision is significant, e.g., when the price — and therefore the risk — is high, involvement of a salesperson can address the customer's questions and concerns. In contrast, when the price and risk are low, customers are more likely to make a purchasing decision without involving a salesperson. In this scenario, marketing communications is called just "marketing." On the other side of the coin, big-ticket transactions can support the cost of salesperson involvement in ways that small-ticket ones cannot.

As a result, for small-ticket items purchased in small quantities, the primary purpose of marketing communications is to generate sales. In contrast, for big-ticket items, the primary purpose of marketing communications is to generate meetings for salespeople, who then generate the sales through meetings. However, not just any meetings will suffice; the meetings should be with "qualified leads" (i.e., people who have a good chance of eventually purchasing the product).

The "good chance" concept is important. A marketing communications program that generates meetings with lots of people who will not purchase the product (false positives) wastes salesperson time. On the other hand, a marketing communications program that generates 100 percent eventual purchases will probably miss a lot of potential customers (false negatives). The right balance must be found based on the characteristics of the market and the productivity and costs of marketing communications vs. sales.

With a complex purchasing decision, the first meeting between a salesperson and a potential customer is the transition point from marketing to sales. That point has properties of both marketing and sales. In this meeting, the salesperson further qualifies the potential customer (i.e., determines whether further investment in the selling process is worthwhile. The salesperson also motivates qualified customers to continue down the path to an eventual purchase).

Assuming the selling process continues, it will consist of a series of additional meetings and other interactions that eventually persuade both parties that a transaction is in their best interests. A complex and extended selling process can be characterized as “business development.”

This article will focus on the use of marketing communications to generate qualified leads.

## **Preparation**

Before you start promoting your product to potential customers, clearly understand the problem your product solves, what types of organizations have the problem, who in those organizations are most affected by the problem, how they think about and articulate the problem, how important and pressing the problem is to them, and other ways they can solve the problem.

The best way to obtain this information is to talk to your current and potential customers. You can also talk to other people, such as consultants and your own people, who have helped solve the problem before.

## **Your Organization’s Image**

Different solution providers communicate different images to customers. Many solution providers strive to communicate a professional and polished image to impress customers with their reliability. Or, they might want to impress customers with their innovativeness or customer service.

However, while customers certainly want to work with reliable, innovative and customer-oriented solution providers, what they really want is someone to help solve their problem—they want a reliable, innovative, customer-oriented *problem solver*. In the term “solution provider,” the word “solution” refers to solving something. That something is the customer’s problem.

In other words, if potential customers recognize you as a someone who will help solve their problems, you already have one foot in the door. Marketing communications should therefore reinforce your organization’s image as a problem solver — *their* problem solver.

People want to work with people, not faceless organizations. The face of your organization can be the CEO, multiple senior executives, an employee, multiple employees, an actor, a celebrity or a model (with an assigned name). B2C companies sometimes use cartoon characters.

## **Trust and Confidence**

Purchasing a product is an act of trust and confidence. The customer must trust you, your organization and your product. They must be confident you can help them achieve their goals. Think of your most trustworthy friend. They may have gained your trust because they:

- Do what they say they will do (i.e., deliver on promises; not overpromise).
- Are consistent and reliable (i.e., never let you down).
- Establish a rapport and communicate openly and honestly
- Listen without judgment; really *hear* what you say.
- Demonstrate that they understand and care about you and your priorities.
- Accept who you are.
- Trust *you*.

- Make you feel special; give you their full attention.
- Look out for your best interests; never take advantage of you; make you feel safe.
- Stick with you through thick and thin; always be there for you.
- Have a reputation in the community for trustworthiness.

If your objective is a sales transaction, trust is of only moderate importance. However, if your objective is a long-term *relationship* — and lots of sales — trust is essential. Are you willing to tell a willing customer that your product is not right for them?

You can start building trust and confidence with marketing communications in the following ways:

- Target a specific audience and demonstrate that you understand and care about them and their priorities, which are special to you.
- Be honest; avoid unprovable superlatives; do not overpromise.
- Communicate eagerness to listen.
- Convey friendliness and openness.
- Establish your credentials.

### **Communications Style**

Advertisements (and other marketing materials) often feature clever text to intrigue the viewer. However, forcing viewers to decipher the message or figure out why they should care is too much to ask. Effective messaging is clear, concise and to the point, so viewers can immediately grasp the message and apply it their own situation.

Advertisements often feature unusual, eye-catching images. However, eye-catching images do not necessarily support the message you wish to convey, as discussed below. Images should convey a warm and welcoming, not cold or scary, feeling. Smiling faces may not be very creative; but people like to see them, especially if the advertisement conveys that your product can put a smile on the viewer's face.

Advertisements often focus on the solution provider and its products, which are of little interest to potential customers. Any advertisement must make it clear how the content applies to the viewer. Potential customers — like everyone else — care about themselves and their own problems. The magic word is "you."

### **Curiosity**

Potential customers should see your series of marketing communications as a series of opportunities to learn more about something that interests them, something they are curious about. To be effective, marketing communications must, therefore, generate curiosity. Curiosity prevents potential customers from ignoring the next message they receive. It also eventually causes them to make an inquiry or accept an invitation to a sales meeting.

If a message satisfies a potential customer's curiosity, they will no longer be interested in learning about your organization or your product.

### **Marketing Communications Methods**

B2B marketing communications can employ a variety of methods, such as the following:

- Marketing collaterals (e.g., flyers, specification sheets, and websites)
- Advertising (e.g., print, email and social media)

- Public relations (e.g., press releases and editorial articles)
- Events (e.g., conferences and tradeshow)

### Marketing Sub-Objectives

As discussed above, the primary goal of marketing communications is to generate meetings with qualified leads for salespeople by building the following three elements among potential customers:

- **Visibility.** They are aware of your existence and your product.
- **Affinity.** They have a favorable opinion of you and your product and believe you care about them or people like them. (People like people who like them.)
- **Engagement.** They are communicating with you.

Visibility, affinity and engagement are matters of degree and can be increased over time. Visibility is required and generally reinforces affinity and engagement. Affinity is required for effective engagement. Marketing communications designed to generate visibility should also promote affinity.

### Features vs. Benefits

The distinction between features and benefits has been much discussed. For example, hammers have the *feature* of being useful for driving nails into wood but the *benefit* is connecting two pieces of wood with a nail.

Marketing literature should focus on a maximum of three benefits — and fewer if possible. Any discussion of features should be in support of the benefits.

Features and benefits can form a chain (or a network): One feature creates a benefit; that benefit is a feature that creates another benefit; and so on. For example, the feature of an automobile driver's seat creates the benefit of seeing over the dashboard. The feature of seeing over the dashboard creates the benefit of being able to safely drive the automobile. The feature of being able to drive the automobile creates the benefit of arriving at the destination.

In practice, it is usually necessary to choose one link in the chain for the benefit. The tricky part is that B2B purchases often involve group decision processes, and the primary benefit for one person in the group may be different than the primary benefit for another person. To further complicate matters, another member of the group may see no benefits or even consider the benefit your product offers to be negative.

If you are marketing to the primary decision-maker, choose the benefit that appeals to them. However, if you are marketing to people who are not decision-makers but can get the ball rolling, start by choosing a benefit that appeals to them.

### Stories

It can be very effective to present your message in a story that potential customers identify with. A story can also help sidestep objections to your claim that you can solve their problems without knowing anything about them. Telling the story about a real person gives it more credibility. Here is an example of a story:

Jill Smith runs a dermatology site in Winters, Calif. Jill was frustrated that she was not seeing a lot of good study opportunities. But now that she is working with us, she knows she will never miss seeing another good dermatology study again.

## **B2B Purchasing Considerations**

Many products exist in a space called the “Iron Triangle” of good, fast and cheap.

In most markets, competitive products gravitate to one of the edges of the triangle. For example, you can obtain quick delivery of a good product, but you will have to pay a premium price. The premium price supports the supplier’s relatively high cost of quickly delivering a good product. For example, a fine dining establishment can prepare a wonderful meal with very attentive service, but that level of cuisine, service and ambiance carries a high cost and, therefore, a high price.

In addition to a product’s performance/quality, price and delivery timeliness, B2B customers also care about their own ability to deploy the product successfully with an acceptable internal level of effort. They also care how the product will affect their business processes; they do not want to interfere with an effective business process to accommodate the requirements of the product.

Organizations buy products to obtain the following high-level benefits:

- Improve their own products.
- Increase revenue.
- Reduce costs.
- Increase efficiency and productivity.
- Increase speed.
- Increase reliability.
- Improve predictability.
- Reduce risks.
- Increase customer satisfaction.
- Improve compliance with government laws and regulations.
- Improve employee motivation and retention.
- Improve financial performance and owner/shareholder satisfaction.
- Improve reputation in their community or market.
- Reduce exceptions that need special handling, especially by management.

These benefits can overlap. What matters is how your potential customers perceive them and how you can translate them into problems that you can help your customers solve.

Organizations buy products, but people make the buying decisions. They certainly consider how a purchase will affect their organization but only within the context of their personal goals: Will buying this product make my supervisor happy? Will it help get me promoted? Will it get me a raise? Will it get me fired? Will it make my life easier or harder?

This is not to say that people are always making decisions that help themselves at the expense of their organizations. The point, rather, is that effective organizations align their personnel’s goals with their own. In fact, the five questions in the previous paragraph all relate to tools that organizations use to achieve this alignment. However, an organization that misuses these alignment tools will lose effectiveness.

## **The Problem**

B2B customers have problems and opportunities. Once an opportunity has been identified, taking advantage of it becomes a problem to be solved, so opportunities are just problems in waiting.

B2B customers buy products to solve problems. The primary goal of marketing communications is to persuade potential customers to investigate the provider's product as a solution to their problem in a timely manner. In many cases, the potential customer does not know they have a problem that needs solving or have an ill-defined idea of the problem, in which case, marketing has additional work to do.

Discern and express the problem from the customer's perspective. Assume, for example, that you are selling a fast car. Is your customer's problem that their car is not fast enough or that their car does not accelerate from zero to 60 in under five seconds or that their neighbor's car is faster?

## **The Buying Decision**

People have two decision engines that work side by side:

- **Intellectual Reasoning.** After careful analysis, this product best fits the characteristics we need.
- **Intuition.** This product feels like the right choice.

Intuition is not just guessing. It develops over many decisions and experiences. It takes advantage of the innate human ability to recognize patterns. Some academic researchers argue that much (or all) reasoning is just the rationalization of intuition. In other words, intuition recognizes a good decision, which intellect then checks for sanity and then forgets about intuition's initial role.

Intellectual reasoning works well with facts and arguments that can be measured and weighed. Intuition works well with fewer facts and arguments, perhaps because human pattern recognition imposes a limit, so too many facts cloud intuition.

Thus, if you want to appeal to intellect, highlight facts and arguments in your marketing materials. However, people can measure and weigh only so many facts and arguments. More than a few dilutes their effect and causes uncertainty and confusion, throwing the decision over to intuition, which bogs down even more, making your marketing materials ineffective.

Skip the ineffective, two-step process by appealing directly to intuition. Focus on the key points that will resonate with the buyer's pattern-recognition engine, with just enough facts and arguments to support the rationalization that follows.

## **Essential Elements in a Marketing Message**

Marketing communications can tackle the full range of visibility, affinity and engagement, but once a potential customer has been identified, the focus must be on that potential customer's problem.

These are the three essential elements in an effective marketing message, in this order of priority:

- We understand you and your problem.
- We have a legitimate solution for your problem.
- If you act now, we can help you solve your problem now.

As an added benefit, these statements demonstrate you care about the potential customer and their problem.

This message presupposes that you have product that serves the needs of some set of potential customers at least as well as competitive products.

## Marketing Communication Template

We can now structure a powerful marketing communication with just these three elements:

YOU HAVE THIS PROBLEM.

HERE IS THE PROOF THAT WE CAN SOLVE YOUR PROBLEM WITH OUR SOLUTION.

CALL US TODAY, SO WE CAN MAKE IT OUR PROBLEM TO START HELPING YOU SOLVE YOUR PROBLEM.

The first element *assumes* the reader has the problem. People who do not have this problem are probably not potential customers for this product and will ignore the message. No harm done.

Be as specific and factual as possible. Avoid unsupported assertions like “best in the market” and present facts like “35 percent cost savings.” Any text that does not significantly support the above three elements is likely to dilute them. If you are communicating with a limited number of people, personalize the messages to show you have a solution to their specific problem.

The objective of this communication is to generate sales meetings with qualified leads. It is not to educate, instruct or image-build, except in service of the three elements above. The less said the better to best tap into the reader’s intuition decision engine. In addition, if you answer a potential customer’s questions to their satisfaction (and, perhaps, inadvertently raise a red flag), they may not give your salesperson the opportunity to take control of the interaction. Stated differently, the objective of this communication is to create a powerful curiosity that can be satisfied only with a sales meeting.

## The First Sales Meeting

As mentioned above, the first sales meeting is transitional, with elements of both marketing and sales. This meeting has four primary objectives:

- Further qualify the contact by learning more about them and their problem.
- Learn about their purchasing status and process.
- Establish rapport to gain their trust and confidence.
- If qualified, obtain a second meeting.

After the initial chit-chat, start the meeting with your elevator pitch — a very short verbal segue into the substance of the meeting. It should not be a conventional elevator pitch in which you describe your capabilities and goals. Rather, it should cover the three key elements above and open the conversation to questions about your potential customer.

You and your contact are both on the same team. Their role is to start the process of obtaining acceptance for your solution from their organization. Your role is to start the process of obtaining the solution from your organization. You work together to solve their problem.

While your contact will want to learn more about your product, your focus, at least initially, should be on their problem and its context. Once you have a good understanding of that, you can then tailor your words to their specific needs. For example, their business process may have certain requirements or their current solution may have certain shortcomings.

The primary role of marketing materials now becomes support of your contact’s efforts to promote your product within their organization. Assume they will not be able to articulate it as clearly as you can. Provide enough information to support that objective but not enough

to allow them to make a decision without another meeting with the decision-maker or someone closer to the decision-maker.

Leave the first sales meeting with a clear understanding of next steps. If possible, gain control of the process going forward by demonstrating your abilities and commitment to helping your contact solve their problem.

The process has now moved out of marketing and into sales.

### **Create a Marketing Communications Plan**

The activities described above are complicated, so create a plan to organize them. Stay in close contact with your sales department to ensure that your communications are delivering the qualified leads they need and that you are teeing them up properly so the sales process can proceed smoothly and efficiently.

Document what you learn. Update the information as you market and sell the product. Measure the performance of communications and constantly test different messaging.

### **Application to Clinical Research**

The following are examples of marketing messages that would resonate in clinical research:

- **SPONSOR PROBLEM:** You need patients for your Type 2 diabetes study.  
**SOLUTION:** Our site has a database of 326 patients who have expressed interest in studies like yours and are likely to meet your eligibility criteria.
- **SPONSOR PROBLEM:** You need high-performing sites for your dermatology study.  
**SOLUTION:** Our network of six sites in Texas and Oklahoma consistently comprise three of the top 10 enrollers in dermatology studies.
- **SPONSOR PROBLEM:** Your study is losing too many enrolled patients.  
**SOLUTION:** Within three weeks of activation, 87 percent of our clients see increases of 20 percent or more in patient retention.
- **SPONSOR PROBLEM:** You are tired of getting blindsided by problems at research sites.  
**SOLUTION:** Our proprietary, AI-based system, using data you are already collecting, has been proven to flag sites with emerging personnel, patient-recruiting and GCP problems an average of two weeks before our clients would have otherwise learned of them.
- **SITE PROBLEM:** Sponsors are not accepting your site into their studies.  
**SOLUTION:** Using our proprietary methods and sponsor relationships, within six months, 100 percent of new clients that follow our instructions join at least three suitable studies within four months ... and perform well.
- **SITE PROBLEM:** You are losing money on your studies.  
**SOLUTION:** With our sponsor relationships and proprietary database, our budget negotiators routinely achieve a 20 percent higher budget than other sites in the same studies.



- **SITE PROBLEM:** Your study coordinators are burning out.  
**SOLUTION:** Our proprietary methodology reduces incidents of burnout 73 percent of the time by identifying struggling study coordinators before they burn out and restores them to a healthier, more sustainable work style ... with NO loss of productivity.
- **SITE PROBLEM:** Technology is piling up at your site and becoming impossible to manage.  
**SOLUTION:** Our unique solution puts you, not the technology, in charge, saving on average 22 percent of time and 88 percent of aggravation.

### **A Message-Driven Organization**

Assuming your organization exists to solve customer problems, your marketing messages can help guide your organization's goals. It is common for personnel to believe their role is to perform whatever tasks are assigned to them without relating those tasks to solving customer problems. Clear, concise and to-the-point marketing messages can help personnel set goals and understand how their work contributes to solving customer problems.

For example, if you are telling research sites your budget negotiators can achieve a 20 percent higher budget than other sites in the same studies, your budget negotiation department's goal is clear. Your information technology department's goal is to create systems that help negotiators achieve that goal (e.g., by providing a database of previous negotiation results and another that tracks performance). Your human relations department's goal is to hire negotiators capable of achieving that goal and to design a compensation system that appropriately rewards performance.

### **Conclusion**

Marketing communications can efficiently generate qualified leads with a simple, three-part message: You have a problem. We can solve it for you. We can solve it now. Embroidering this message with extraneous selling points just dilutes the power of the message.

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