Marketing is a Conversation

By David Maister and Lois Kelly

"The awful truth about marketing is that it broadcasts messages to people who don't want to listen…. much of business communication is written in contrived and artificial language, supposedly designed to impress, but actually signaling just how impersonal the firm and its professionals are."

As the authors of ***The Cluetrain Manifesto*** (Perseus Publishing, 2000) suggest, it's time we stopped thinking of marketing as a one-way propaganda campaign.

Being talked to, preached at, or lectured to by those trying to win our business is generally felt as annoying, not persuasive. As clients, we don't respond to conventional, one-way, "packaged" marketing because it doesn't answer the questions we have when we are trying to buy, nor tell us what we need to know.

If you want to win my business, give me the chance to talk to you, person-to-person, about *my* needs, wishes, and wants. Make it easy and comfortable for me to share *my* secrets. In short, if you really want my business, let's talk; let's have a *conversation*.

There's nothing conceptual or special in our use of the term "conversation." We mean it literally, the way we all use the word in everyday speech.

A conversation's characteristics include:

- It's person to person; not role to role. People use normal language, not "corporate-speak."
- Both sides talk, and what one says is dependent upon what the other has just said.
- Both parties are engaged in joint problem solving; neither is trying to win or prevail.
- It's designed to allow people with different views to learn from one another.

Marketing (and selling) begin to work when a conversation moves away from being a role-to-role exchange of capabilities, contracts, and costs, and becomes a person-to-person interactive dialogue about ideas, beliefs, and perspectives. Only then can it build the chemistry, confidence, and commitment that lead to new revenues.

An Example

To illustrate the power of conversations versus one-way communications, consider how you might maximize your marketing effectiveness if you were invited to give a presentation at a client's industry meeting.

Being invited to give the plenary speech provides you with an opportunity to impress the audience with your great insights and personal style! But consider how much more effective you could be if you asked the conference organizers to let you also run a breakout discussion session, in competition with other simultaneous sessions, later in the day.

Here are some of the reasons why the small-group conversation would be the superior marketing activity:

- You get to talk to someone who, by choosing to participate, is admitting that he or she has a need (and you don't waste time or money on people who haven't).
- You can now not only naturally share your thoughts but also get these potential clients to tell you how they see the issue you discussed and how it relates to them and their firms.
- You can better tailor your comments to their questions and needs rather than, as in the plenary speech, guess which topics might have the broadest appeal.
- You have a chance to discover what your client thinks are his or her most troublesome issues.
- You can let your potential buyer meet, understand, and get comfortable with the individual who will serve him or her.
- It provides both a reason and permission for you to make a follow-up call ("I've thought some more about the issues you raised last week and have put some ideas together. May I come by and share them with you?").

Both the one-way speech and the small-group discussion can be parts of your marketing package. But while it sometimes *feels* that being the featured speaker is high-impact, the truth is that you usually earn a higher return on your time by engaging in a real dialogue with people who have chosen to talk with you.

In professional services, the measure of marketing effectiveness is not the number of people who hear your message but rather how effectively and quickly you can get a client to share his or her problems with you.

This applies equally to both prospects and existing clients. Despite firms throwing around terms such as 'customer relationship management' and 'cross-selling,' there is no more certain way to deepen an existing business relationship (and generate additional business) than by having regular, ongoing conversations with your clients, person-to-person, about the things going on in their business and how you might help them address any emerging threats and/or opportunities.

Note the eternal paradox: the less you try to *sell* in any one of these ongoing conversations, the more comfortable your clients are likely to feel about sharing their concerns, issues, and needs—and hence the more likely it is that you will attract added revenue.

Turning traditional marketing approaches into conversations

In stressing the need to create conversations to improve your marketing effectiveness, we do not mean to imply that all traditional marketing approaches should be discarded. Rather, they need to be restructured into conversational activities. Here are some ideas that work:

1. Instead of commissioning market research, hold a "salon" with a small group of clients.

People are increasingly numbed and inured to the various forms of data collection used in market research. When was the last time you filled out the hotel's "please tell us how we are doing" form, or agreed to participate in the market research company's late-evening unsolicited telephone survey?

Why don't you make it more personal and real by inviting some people whom you really like and admire to come and discuss important issues of mutual interest? Be sure to invite interesting people, not just those from your biggest and most profitable accounts.

A number of consulting and accounting firms discovered long ago that to make a seminar effective, it wasn't necessary or even desirable for firm members to "hog the podium" and make all the presentations.

The mere fact of organizing and running regular get-togethers for clients and prospects allowed the firm to learn what was on clients' minds and, not coincidentally, demonstrate that the firm's people were in the flow of what people in the client's industry were thinking. That's what hosting a "salon" is all about.

You can kick things off by posing a *what-if* question that challenges a key assumption, and let the conversation unfold. You will intervene with a prompt only when the attendees can't think of the next thing to talk about.

To promote real discussion, ban presentations. Instead, use themes that center around "Why?" and "Why Not?" questions; and debate new ways of understanding client issues.

Then you can wrap up by asking your clients if they think your firm should spend time around one or more of the ideas that emerged. Ask whether that would be of value to them.

Meetings do not have to be in person. You could make your top professionals available for live "call-in" sessions for interested clients, so that they can "Ask the Experts." Then, you could record each session and offer them as podcasts or as rebroadcast programs from your website.

One of our clients does this superbly: a group of their clients meets monthly by phone around lunchtime, so they can eat sandwiches at their own desks while still participating in a 45-minute conversation moderated by an advisor from the firm. Clients describe it as unobtrusive, personal, effective, and free – and as a solid means of winning their business and earning their loyalty.

2. Instead of focus groups, satisfaction, and other qualitative research, create private online communities for clients.

The salon concept can be extended to cyberspace. Today's on-line technology not only facilitates this old idea but perhaps even requires it.

The Internet, including blogs, chat rooms, and forums, has changed how people get ideas, share information, communicate in a human voice, ask questions, and respond. Its two-way style has been embraced, changing how people want to learn, connect, and build relationships. Conversations, once key, are now crucial.

Hosting and moderating such a private online community site (or forum) allows clients (and possibly prospects) to pose questions to peers, to provide input on developing industry issues and, yes, to comment on your new or enhanced services. Clients will be able to find new ideas not only from you, but also from their peers.

If *someone* is going to provide the place for people to chat on-line about the issues your firm serves, shouldn't it be your firm?

3. Instead of developing a capabilities brochure (including making your website an electronic brochure), turn your website into an interactive location offering advice, ideas, and commentary on trends.

The Internet offers many ways to invite visitors to your site to interact and participate. You can, for example, use "how valuable was this" buttons to get people to tell you what types and formats of information are most useful to both clients and prospects.

You can get visitors, viewers, and listeners to suggest topics for future content. You can use interactivity to find out which means of communication each client prefers: video, audio, or the written word, and let them select their preference. You can help each individual client experience your people and their thinking in the manner that they prefer, instead of treating all clients as an undifferentiated part of a mass audience.

4. Instead of a newsletter, create and maintain a blog (a regular journal posted on the web), sharing your ideas on topics relating to your clients' sectors.

Blogging forces you (for better or for worse) to think about your ideas, beliefs, and opinions, and how they are relevant to your marketplace.

Critical to a blog's success is a feature that not only allows but encourages people to post replies. Reply to the repliers. Analyze what topics are being read the most. Pay attention to data about where you're drawing people from, and factor that into your marketing planning.

It's really hard to sustain a conversation, especially on a blog, when you don't have anything interesting to say. Should you find you are getting stuck and are groping for something to write, it may be a signal that you, individually or as a firm, have a lot less to contribute than you thought.

And if your clients don't find what you are saying to be interesting, your problem is more than a marketing challenge!

5. Instead of having a set of slides for sales presentation talking about your capabilities or your philosophies, talk about things that people like to listen to: stories!

Stories help you make meaning and decipher complexity. They present points in a way that allows the listener to accept their truth without ego or ownership getting in the way.

They are memorable and repeatable, thereby helping employees and clients tell others about your firm.

They are the soul of conversational marketing. "Here's a story that's interesting…"

Anytime you can get the other person to say "…and then what happened?" you will be making great progress in connections, relationships, and creating the desire in that person to talk with you more and to work with you. You need to be ready to not only describe key principles, but also to give interesting anecdotes that illustrate your ability to offer innovative ideas and solutions.

But don't keep it just one way. Make it easy for clients to tell you their stories. You'll learn a great deal about what needs they have, what issues they are prepared to tackle, what past experiences they have had with others in your profession, and even what new projects they are prepared to launch and pay for.

6. Find ways to see the client's perspective of what you are communicating.

By definition, we professionals, when we write or speak, are doing so for clients who are not necessarily trained in our field. We must write for the intelligent layperson, communicating our expertise clearly without condescension.

One rule that works effectively for us is that no article (or any document of any length) leaves the office until both one's spouse and one's secretary have read it, said it makes sense, and that it flows reasonably well. Both "checkers" are intelligent laypersons with no formal business training; yet they prove exactly the right audience to test our language, tone, and sense.

How else are you going to make sure that what you say and intend to communicate is truly being heard as you wish it to be? Writing (or speaking) to be easily understood, and not just to impress, is a skill that can take a great deal of conscious effort to develop.

7. Instead of developing presentations and proposals, conduct sales and proposal meetings as "joint problem definition and option generating" sessions.

When you force clients to sit through pre-packaged presentations, you often create dynamics destructive to the chances of establishing connections that win business. Formal, prepared presentations force clients into passive listening roles, and make presenters appear pompous and more concerned about talking about themselves than about helping the client.

If you doubt this, think back to the last time you had to sit through a PowerPoint presentation. How engaged were you? Most of us sit through such presentations, patiently or impatiently, silently asking ourselves, "When is this person going to shut up, so that I can ask about the real issues on my mind?"

So, what should you do? Simple. Start a conversation. Sit down at eye-level with your client or prospect, and say: "I've brought along all the materials and information you suggested—it's in this set of handouts I'm giving you now—but rather than my starting talking, perhaps I can ask what it is that you'd most like to find out in this meeting?"

You'll waste less time, and your clients will be grateful that you are treating them with respect. And you'll win more business by getting quickly to the issues on *their* minds.

This analysis can be taken further. As David pointed out in "*Negotiating Quality,"* a chapter in ***True Professionalism*** (Free Press, 1997), you can't really write a proposal until you find out which version of success a client wants with this project. Does the client want the version with the least up-front cost, or the biggest long-run impact? The quickest impact, or the one that requires the least involvement by their people? Any of these are valid client requirements, but you can't write a proposal until you have had an in-depth conversation about the alternatives. Saying "Here's our firm's approach" is a gamble at best, and most likely suicidal. Proposals should be developed and written together with the client as a joint activity.

8. Instead of worrying about your logos and the appearance of your written materials, pay attention to your physical space ensuring that it is designed to encourage true conversation.

For example, you can take the tables out of some of your conference rooms. You can turn one wall into a white board on which participants can write as ideas emerge. You can make another wall a cork board for sticky notes so that ideas can be attached as conversations unfold. If you want clients to *engage*, create an environment that facilitates this!

9. Instead of spending their time planning and strategizing, get your firm's leaders to conduct a series of key "royalty to royalty" meetings outside of formal presentations.

Clients are skeptical about powerful CEOs or managing partners who show up for key sales presentations or "beauty parades," never to be heard from or seen again. It's an old idea, but still an underutilized one: use your senior officers to have meetings with senior client officers, talking to each other about issues in a way that the mere mortals serving clients day-to-day may not be able to do. The goal of good marketing is not only to create more conversations. It is to create more *kinds* of conversations that will lead to new insights, stronger relationships and better ways of working together.

Some guidelines for creating and conducting effective conversations

So far, we have discussed some of the opportunities that professionals and their firms have to create conversations. Now let's turn to the topic of how you ensure that you are skilled, engaging conversationalists in all of your marketing activities.

Think of a dinner party conversation. What makes a good conversationalist at a dinner party? He or she:

- Has a fresh point of view, but does not try to thrust it upon everyone else
- Speaks politely and respectfully
- Tells good stories to illustrate key points
- Is good at drawing other people's views out and drawing them into the conversation
- Speaks intelligently on a variety of subjects, but is not afraid to admit areas of ignorance
- Avoids trotting out well-worn arguments that have been made time and time again
- Listens with genuine interest
- Is light-hearted in style, but always respectful of other's views

All of these conversational skills also apply in effective marketing. You may remember to behave this way at a dinner party, but do your sales meetings really meet these criteria? What about your seminars, speeches, articles, blogs, and websites?

The tone of the experience you provide clients in your marketing efforts should be friendly; it should invite people in to chat and to think about ideas; and it should encourage both sides to get to know each other as people.

This, of course, requires that you are comfortable in your own skin, and that you are who you are. Much of traditional marketing is designed so that people *aren't* required to put their own humanity on display. They hide behind formal, corporate language and tactics. Not only are such approaches ineffective, but they create the impression that the professional or the firm is afraid to let its hair down.

One of us (Lois Kelly) recently advised a major corporation that was reviewing its relationships with five outside PR firms. All five of the established firms explained their credentials and relevant case studies, all of which sounded remarkably the same. They all stressed how results- and client-focused they were, again sounding remarkably the same. They all asked the right questions. It was difficult to distinguish one from another. None was trying to engage the client in a dialogue. Each firm's style was more report-like than rapport-like.

The company finally called in two underdog firms that didn't fit what they had previously thought should be the criteria for selecting an agency. Because these agencies didn't think they had much of a chance of getting the business, they were frank, funny, provided unusual insights, challenged the company's assumptions, and were blunt about what it would take to improve the company's reputation.

"Those guys are great," was the overwhelming company response after the first meeting, and again through all subsequent meetings. The company hired both of the underdog agencies instead of the established firms.

The traditional marketing (or sales) approach had failed miserably because it took the safe road, presenting capabilities and talking "at" the prospect rather than beginning a conversation that made the other side want to continue the dialogue.

If you want to impress your prospects, you can't afford to make arguments and points that are commonly made. You *must have* a fresh point of view – and it's rarely effective if it's just another claim about you, your firm, or "your philosophy."

Summary

In discussing these thoughts with our clients, we often hear the view expressed that "This all sounds nice, but we are often only given a small amount of a client's (or prospect's) attention. There's no time for a real conversation. Shouldn't we use that brief amount of time to communicate what's special about us?"

This reasoning is flawed for many reasons, most importantly because when your initial time with a client is brief, the main success goal is make the client *want* to have another meeting, to continue the conversation. And talking about yourself (or your ideas) is an unlikely way to make this happen.

Far better to use your limited time to get the client or prospect thinking about things in a new way, and hence eager to schedule a follow-up meeting and continue the conversation. For example, why not do what a good dinner-table conversationalist would do. Offer a provocative or counterintuitive hypothesis and begin to ask: "What if we looked at this in a different way?" "That might be interesting." "I wonder what the reaction of others might be."

The goals of initiating and deepening relationships are vastly more important than conventional marketing's goals of "building "awareness" and generating "leads." And nothing— *nothing*—builds relationships better than regular, meaningful conversations.

To have these interesting, meaningful conversations, you must have something new to say. Developing fresh points of view means reframing issues, and creating new metaphors and language to talk about them. (See the chapters on *framing* and *envisioning* in ***The Trusted Advisor.***)

However, the message itself is only the beginning of marketing. Its value exists only if it leads to a dialogue with clients: "That was interesting, tell me more!"

And if your clients aren't asking for more, then they aren't finding value in your message. Let's never forget: if it's not a conversation, then it's not effective marketing.

David Maister is the author of a number of bestselling books including: *Managing the Professional Service Firm, True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) (co-author), *Practice What You Preach* (2001), and *First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals* (2002) (co-author.) Prior to launching his (solo but global) consulting practice in 1985, he served as a professor at the Harvard Business School.

OTHER RECENT ARTICLES BY DAVID, AVAILABLE AT: www.davidmaister.com

Do You Really Want Relationships?
Strategy and the Fat Smoker
Young Professionals: Cultivate The Habits of Friendship
Are You Abusive, Cynical or Exciting?
Doing It for the Money
A Great Coach in Action
Geographic Expansion Strategies
Management: What It Really Takes

You can automatically receive David's future articles via e-mail (at no cost) by registering on his website (www.davidmaister.com).

TEL: 1-617-262-5968
EMAIL: david@davidmaister.com
WEBSITE: www.davidmaister.com

Lois Kelly is a founding principal at Foghound, a communications strategy firm that helps marketing, communications, and sales organizations develop conversation themes and programs that make it easy for their executives, sales reps, and communications managers to talk about the company in ways that build interest, understanding, trust, and relationships.

Her new book, *Something To Talk About*, will be published this fall.

TEL: 1-401-333-5464
MOBILE: 1-401-952-5611
EMAIL: lkelly@foghound.com
WEBSITE: http://www.foghound.com
BLOG: http://foghound.blogspot.com