

Guidelines for Information Marketing



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■ Marketing is the battle cry in virtually every business sector today. As information professionals, we have not studied the science of marketing as part of our academic or on-the-job training.

Marketing, from my viewpoint, has three elements. It explains how a product can help another person solve a problem, work more efficiently, or satisfy a need. What it boils down to is serving an individual or group of individuals.

What I would like to do today is share with you my Guidelines for Information Marketing (hereinafter, **GIMs**). I can't guarantee the universality of these principles, but in my experience, each contributes to a solid foundation on which to build a marketing program.

Let's look at each of these **SIMs** and then review a list of marketing tactics which you can shape to meet the requirements of your particular situation.

■ Nine strategies for information marketing

SIM I.

Tell the truth. A great temptation exists to shape facts to make selling easier. In the information business, the absence of standards and an information-industry Consumer's Report has encouraged the creation of cut-rate information products. In 1984 and 1986, I described this approach to electronic information product development as the "Seventh Avenue Strategy." As we all know, the knock-

Meeting a need is little more than solving a problem for someone. Without making need satisfaction overly complex, keep in mind that the “problem” can be solved with a product or service which provides esteem, power, or pleasure.

Examples of information products and services which meet needs squarely are Bowker’s Books in Print Plus, the new newsletter *MLS: Marketing Library Services* in which I played a small part, and the 1988 Corporate Intelligence Seminar series offered by Dun & Bradstreet, Predicasts, and Data Courier. Let’s look at each briefly:

- Books in Print Plus provides a CD-ROM version of Bowker’s Books in Print with a difference. One can locate a title and then using the capabilities of the product order the book electronically. Libraries and book stores find the product reduces paperwork and staff time.
- ***MLS: Marketing Library Services*** is a newsletter edited by Sharon LaRosa in Boston. It provides case studies of libraries which have successfully marketed their services. According to LaRosa, no other publication addressed libraries’ need for practical marketing information. As a result, the newsletter has become an overnight success.
- The Corporate Intelligence Seminars are offered to end users and librarians by three competitors--Dun & Bradstreet, Predicasts, and Data Courier. The seminar has two parts: A content-oriented review of the products offered by the three business database producers in the morning and a how-to session offered in the afternoon with the emphasis on searching techniques used to retrieve the information. The seminars meet the need for librarians and end users to get comparative looks at business databases and practical how-to search information. Average attendance is over 100 people per program.

None of these products is a me-too, a hand-me-down idea, or a knock-off of another’s idea. Each company has identified a need and developed a product to satisfy that need. Integrity characterizes the effective satisfaction of an information need.

SIM 5.

Find a niche and fill a need in it. A niche in marketing parlance is group of prospects with some unifying characteristic and a common problem. Examples of excellent niche marketing are the E. B. Stevens Co.’s magazine subscription services for library acquisition departments. As most of you know, EBSCO reduces paperwork and centralizes the subscription process. To cite another example: Dow Jones News/Retrieval provides business people with access to stock

off product drives the fashion business. More and more information professionals are taking this path as well.

A number of information producers sell a product with a hefty journal list. When one compares the list with what is in the database, reality is different from the description.

SIM 1 requires that an information marketer present facts objectively about:

- Consistency of the data
- Other ways to get the same data
- Editorial or professional standards used to develop the data
- Copyright and ownership of the data
- Accuracy of the data
- Costs in comparison with other ways to get equivalent data
- Human- and machine-dependent performance features affecting the delivery of the data.

The essence of truthfulness is your ability to compare your products factually with similar or competitive products. Avoid describing a product with a metaphor. When I hear a marketing presentation which says, "Our database is just like Database X," the marketer does not know whether I will think more of his product or less of Database X or vice-versa. In short, the marketer loses control of my thoughts.

It is equally dangerous to compare a new or unknown service with the service of a large, established company. The credibility of the marketer is at stake. How can an information broker, for example, expect a client to believe that the service provided by a small firm to be equivalent to that offered by a nationally-known organization.

Marketing experts rarely take liberties with the truth. They don't have to cut corners. They value their credibility. In short, SIM 1 means, "Keep your credibility." Without it, you will fail in the long run.

SIM 2.

Build relationships with your prospects and customers. It is a often-overlooked information-marketing fact that the number of people who buy information products and services is very small in comparison with the number of people who sell information products. Equally important and ignored by most information marketers is that selling information--regardless of form--has more in common with selling a service than selling a tangible product.

A successful marketing program always pivots on individuals who make a purchasing decision. The personal approach means that you work on a one-on-one basis. It does not mean that you advertise personal service. If you provide personal service, it's not necessary to talk about it.

Examples of effective customer service include Dialog's small group training sessions, IAC's and Mead Data's direct visits to customers, and Predicast's 800 telephone service.

Bad customer service includes a clumsy telephone interface to a help desk, a company which has different representatives calling on the same prospect without coordinating visits, or a self-serving newsletters filled with puffery.

SIM 3.

Deliver a product or service that meets your personal standards of excellence. Be proud of the work you're doing.

If I cannot feel comfortable about my product, how can I market it effectively? You know how strongly I feel about **ABI/INFORM**, **Business Dateline**, and **PNI**. At Data Courier, I try to the best of my ability to keep these products up to my personal standards.

There is a corporate side to meeting standards of excellence as well. The company must value excellence and institutionalize procedures which help the individuals do their best job.

In my experience, individuals govern the quality of the information product, and they energize organizations to make the excellence a routine part of what the company does. The corporate culture, therefore, is shared by the individual employees and the organization. Steve Goldspiel personally and institutionally makes Disclosure the outstanding product it is. Similarly, Patricia Markert, Andrea Broadbent, and Julia Denny drive the quality of the McGraw-Hill electronic products. Andy Mills and Steve Keeble at Technical Publishing (**InvesText**) create an environment in which excellence can flourish.

SIM 4.

Meet a need. Expert marketers can sell because they have an uncanny ability to find needs which have not been met, or they can create needs and then sell products which satisfy them.

Information marketers, in my opinion, are on more solid footing if they try to meet a need which exists but is not fully satisfied. Inventing needs, if not handled expertly, can degenerate into hucksterism.

data, gaining on CompuServe and staying well in front of Delphi, Dialcom, The Source, GENIE, and other similar services. Dow Jones is positioned to dominate this niche because they have skillfully packaged a number of business services of interest to marketing, administrative, and management people. They have captured significant market share in this niche.

In my experience, the more precisely you can define the niche and the need for your product, the greater your chance of success. The Standard & Poor's CD-ROM, produced in conjunction with Dialog, will probably be a winner. S&P knows who needs the product and what problems the product solves. Contrast this with the CD-ROM versions of ERIC. None has made significant market headway because the library market does not need ERIC in its present CD-ROM formats.

I learned the hard way that it is easier to find an empty niche and create a product which meets a specific need than it is to try and create a product which is all things to all people. If you know your market niche:

- You can target your promotional activities to a specifically defined group of prospects
- Marketing dollars can be used to repeat a message to a small group instead of spending larger amounts to reach more people one time.
- You can focus your message.

SIM 6.

Position your product to win friends, not make enemies. In the information business, it is rare that a single source can answer a complex question adequately.

Information professionals recognize the complementary nature of information products. Established information companies also realize the supporting roles products play. It is rarely a wise idea to attack a competitor in his market niche head on. The established competitor can cut prices or offer a package of services the newcomer cannot match.

A wise course of action is to establish a complementary relationship among information marketers, their products and services. Then, when it is necessary to compete, everyone helps the customer to make an informed judgment about which product's features and benefits are right for meeting his needs. Positioning, therefore, means:

- Complement existing products and services

- Fill a specific, empty niche with a product or service which meets a real need
- Minimize the head-to-head competition and emphasize the mutually supportive nature of products and services.

You sell more when your competitors are avoiding you than when they are actively selling against you.

SIM 7.

Be consistent. I am interested in what marketers call repositioning. This concept means that the marketing of the product is reshaped in order to attract more sales.

Consider for a moment the directory and database of software marketed as MENU. Originally the database was to drive software sales. The product was made part of a large European publisher and then marketed as a database of software with emphasis placed upon the operating versions of each software package. Now MENU is a database of business software and specialized directories. With each modification in the way the product is explained to the customers, repositioning is occurred.

In my experience, consistency in product positioning is critical. Repositioning can be successful only if handled with care. The more frequently a product is repositioned, the message communicated is that the people making the product don't have their act together. The different messages sent to the market are confusing.

Contrast MENU's marketing with the approach taken by Information Sources Inc. of Berkeley, California. The original product was a business software print directory. The product went online in 1984 and has undergone thoughtful evolution. It now offers customized print listings and will soon include reviews of business software products. The marketing of the product and its positioning have been consistent. Since the product's inception, its credibility and revenues have risen steadily.

Chart a course and stick with it. Gradual evolution is preferable to product revolution. Repositioning often foreshadows failure.

SIM 8.

Stand behind the product. Most of us have had problems with automobile warranties or know of someone who has. The story is the same. A car develops a problem and the dealer can't or won't fix the car. Tempers flare and the once-proud owner says, "I'll never buy an XYZ again."

In the information industry, according to Carlos Cuadra, publisher of the Directory of Online Databases, the speed of new database development has slowed and the rate of database failure has risen. Fewer and fewer companies are willing to make a long-term commitment to this type of information product.

The fact of the matter is that it takes time for an information product to take hold in the marketplace. Only a very few products can be an instant success like **InvesText**, which contains the full text of reports from investment firms, or **Business Dateline**, selected articles from America's and Canada's regional business publications. Most information products require a lengthy incubation time. H.W. Wilson, West Publishing, the New York Times Co., McGraw-Hill, and others have been working for years to build their information credibility and product portfolios.

These companies offer an implicit money-back guarantee. They want customers to be pleased with the information they offer and stand behind what they do. They are in business for the long-haul and do not chase the quick buck. Mead Data, for example, has been committed to full-text business information for more than a decade, and that commitment says something about the company's persistence.

If you introduce a product and quit, I have found that it becomes more difficult to get support for the next product. It is almost better to create a product, work at it, and fail than to pull the plug. In our world, precipitous actions make people nervous, uncertain, and uncomfortable because you could pull the plug on them.

Be prepared to stand behind your product by providing fast, quality service. At all costs, make the customer feel good about the product, company, and you.

SIM 9.

Use E-F-A-B. Marketers trained at business schools in the U.S. and England learn to sell by following the formula F-A-B or **Features-Advantages-Benefits**. First the marketer explains the features of the product; that is, what it does. Next he spells out the advantages of the product, typically in terms of competing products. Last he tells the customer how the product or service benefits him; for example, saves time or money.

The problem with this formula is that it works only with products which the customer understands. It assumes a solid foundation of knowledge, experience, and needs. If I go to buy a big-screen TV, the salesman tells me what the TV's features are; for example,

remote control, stereo sound, and black-matrix picture tube. He then gives me the advantages of these features, contrasting them with another model more or less expensive than the one I'm looking at. Good marketers watch for non-verbal clues about the price I'm willing to pay or ask, "How much do you want to spend?" Finally, he gives me the benefits. Last week, the benefits I was offered included no payments until January 1989, free delivery, more enjoyment for my family, and better audio.

What happens, though, when the product and the service are not well known or understood by the prospect? In my experience, information products and services are hard to understand and difficult to explain. Even well-informed information professionals are unable to keep at their fingertips the nuances of well-known, established information products. They are not able to have a wide and deep experience base for new electronic media, new or improved databases, and new print information products.

The more advanced the technology, the more complex the marketing job. Further complicating marketing is the Marshall McLuhan's observation that the "medium is the message." The print version of Dun's Million Dollar Directory is a different product from the on-line version in File 5 17.

To market an information product requires an additional and crucial step preceding F-A-B. The first step is E, education. The information marketer must explain:

- What the information is (a factual description)
- What the information can do (applications-based examples)
- What the technology is (factual description and comparison and contrast with the information technology familiar to the prospect)
- How the information and technology interact (allay fears and concerns about complexity, obsolescence, ease-of-use, and maintenance).

Once this foundation is put in place, then F-A-B approach makes sense.

It is one of my recurring nightmares that I market a new information product and do not follow E-F-A-B. The result is that I go to conference after conference and have to explain again and again what the product is and how it works. It is a modern version of the myth of Sisyphus. I push the rock to the top of the hill only to have it

roll back down. In short, I am doomed to explain and never make a sale because I tried to take a short cut.

The prospect always gets educated. It is better for me to do that job because then I have some influence over the foundation on which a purchase decision is made. If I let someone else do the teaching, I will have a more difficult time making the sale because I won't have any first-hand knowledge of what the prospect knows.

■ 25 tactics

Before concluding, I would like to offer a shopping list of 25 marketing tactics. Pick and choose the tactics you need to help you market your products.

To use this list, select the tactics and then implement them using the nine **SIMs** outlined above. There is no one way to market. You must **innovate** and modify.

- Develop a strategic information plan. Know where you are going, what your budget is, and how you will measure success. A successful marketing program is not a random walk; it is a purposeful journey.
- Create a newsletter for your customers. There are too many newsletters today. Keep yours short, easy-to-read, and on schedule. This establishes routine communication to your prospects and customers.
- Develop a presentation using slides or flip charts that follow the E-F-A-B format. This is the basic selling tool.
- Write articles for professional publications, reprint them, and use them as a direct mail pieces. This is a third-party endorsement of you.
- Offer one-on-one training about your product to senior managers or influence leaders. This provides education and builds relationships.
- Hold small-group training for departments. This establishes a dialogue with potential customers.
- Invite other information professionals to give presentations on complementary products. This establishes your credibility and demonstrates confidence.
- Assemble a portfolio of case studies describing the benefits of your product. This is third-party endorsement and applications selling.

- Prepare a letter-sized brochure summarizing your product. Keep it simple and on one page. The more like a technical specification the more credibility the brochure has. Expensive printing and elaborate design can communicate a lack of judgment in how to spend money.
- Publish a compilation of information on a hot topic. This shows how your product looks and makes it tangible.
- Publish an annual information report. This documents your track record.
- Communicate consistently in a variety of media; for example, bulletin boards, news releases, and memoranda. This provides a routine information flow about your product.

Obtain new **signage** or a new logo. This calls attention to a new or improved product. It signals a more aggressive marketing posture.

Make sales calls on prospects and ask them what they need. This builds your information base, defines niches, and suggests new products.

- Publish a list of new materials available. This is news and communicates positive change.

Offer to assist selected departments with specific projects. This builds a track record within a niche.

Use the inter-office mail to inform individuals of developments important to them. This maintains communication and reinforces relationships.

- Hold an annual open house. This creates traffic and provides an opportunity to talk one-on-one.

Establish a telephone hotline. This is the evidence that you are there to help your customers.

Build bridges to the corporate computer center. This gives credence to the complementary nature of your products.

- Acquire text-retrieval and database software and offer to assist groups wanting to build databases. This positions you as an expert.
- Keep track of library usage, queries, and revenue. This builds evidence which can be used to demonstrate value.
- Attend trade shows and circulate trip reports. This shows your ability to bring valuable information to prospects.

- Get as much knowledge about systems, technology, and competitive products as you can. This enables you to be spontaneously helpful.

■ The next step

For you to take the next step in marketing, I have several suggestions.

First, enroll in marketing courses at a university in your area. The courses will reward you in many ways. Chief among them are the class discussions and the opportunity to absorb case studies of marketing successes and failures.

Second, become familiar with the articles and books cited in this paper's bibliography.

And, try your hand at marketing on small or large scales. If you follow the **SIMs**, you will be able to refine your efforts and help ensure yourself of success.

One final word: Marketing is nothing more than helping people solve problems. Keep that in mind, and you will be able to spark growth and excitement for your products.