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Keep Your Head in the Clouds, but Your Feet on the Ground

By Arik Brooks and Lindsey Mathieu

Positioning strategy, brand promise, mission, and vision . . . terms commonly associated with the important task of defining your identity as a company: Who are you? What do you do? What makes you unique?

Defining your identity is a daunting process. This is why companies often look beyond their walls to be guided down the path of self-exploration. They hire consulting firms, sometimes at great expense, to craft statements that answer the aforementioned questions and develop core messages that serve as the launchpad for all resulting marketing communications.

Ready for Liftoff

If your firm decides to embark upon such a journey, how do you gauge what makes sense for your business?

The answer will vary. What works for a consumer brand servicing the public is

not what works for a mid-sized firm in the A/E/C space targeting select verticals in a state or region. The consumer brand might be positioning itself in the context of a popular trend in the national dialogue—take Whole Foods Market and the organic movement, for example. Conversely, a professional services firm needs to position itself within the competitive landscape as a recognized expert to even be considered to bid on any project.

With these two extreme examples, the differences in audience, message delivery, and goals are apparent. For example, Whole Foods' reach may be many millions of people, but the A/E/C firm may operate in a familiar universe of a few hundred. Whole Foods' message is delivered via online and in-store promotions, national and regional broadcast advertising, digital campaigns, and direct mail. On the flip side, the A/E/C firm's message is delivered via a website, brochures, Statements of Qualifications, RFP



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responses, routine networking events, and a touch of outbound marketing. Whole Foods is trying to transform the overall grocery shopping experience and change the way Americans look at food, whereas the A/E/C firm is trying to compete against a handful of pre-qualified firms as a preferred service provider.

Considering such contrasts, it is important to let one overarching objective guide the process: develop statements that ring true for your company that can be universally accepted and adopted by your employees and prospective clients.

Houston, We Have a Problem

With good intentions, an A/E/C firm seeking to define its identity can sometimes go wildly off track. We have witnessed strategic planning sessions resulting in the concoction of statements so lofty that they are not practical or applicable to the industries or the actual needs of prospective clients.

Your firm just made a significant investment of time, money, and resources in hopes of finding a sense of purpose, a sharpened focus, a renewed identity, the power to transform your business, and resulting financial success. But if this process only yielded terms and ideas that are not actually used during the sales process, all you can show for it is words on paper.

If your business development people do not eagerly adopt these statements, you might have a problem. If you're at an event and respond to the question, "What does your firm do?" and the person seems more confused than before they asked, you might have a problem. If your employees can't connect their day-to-day contributions to these statements, you might have a problem.

Before embarking on your journey of self-discovery, set practical expectations. The end results can, and should, be something

real that you and your team can use while selling. They should represent a perfect balance of visionary and practical thinking. They should be mixed with equal parts right and left brain. You should be able to confidently and comfortably express them while at the bar talking shop.

It's Been a Privilege Flying With You

Don't get caught with your head so far in the clouds that you can no longer recognize the needs of your audience at ground level. Don't lose sight of your original goal for introspection—crafting effective messages in response to the following questions to strengthen your marketing communications: Who are you? What does your firm do? What makes you unique? And most important, make sure the answers to these questions directly resonate with the needs of your customers. ■