



GoldsteinGroup
communications

Build a Compelling Message Architecture

WHITE PAPER

We think of marketing like a machine. There are a wide variety of moving parts – message, targets, competitors, tactics, quality of execution. Just as with any machine, getting it to perform at top efficiency requires that each of the components in the machine are well tuned and running right.



When fine-tuning the machine, it's easy – and tempting – to focus on the tactical elements. Maybe we shouldn't go to that trade show. Maybe our emails need to be more visual. How about more videos?

Often, though, we see companies struggle with the earliest fundamental question that drives marketing – a message that's compelling and differentiated. Getting the message right is hard, and all the tight execution in the world on the tactics won't really take hold if the programs are built on a message that's, well, off-message. It's a bit like pushing on a rope – nothing seems to gain traction and work as well as it should.

Why do companies seem to struggle so much with messaging? Often, we see companies as too close to it. They don't have the distance or context to see how their message is playing. Or they feel they've got a differentiated message, something that's truly unique, but in truth it's just another case of "me-messaging," something too similar to everyone else.

Messages tend to come from a company CEO or someone with a voice too dominant to generate critical thinking. Or they tend to come from those "inside the room," a group of executives who use their own experiences to decide what's important, rather than anyone who's truly listening to customers. Sometimes companies settle on a message, and it may not be good enough to attract attention or ultimately customers.

A good message will do two things for you: attract attention (brand awareness) and persuade your target audience that you're offering the best solution (brand preference). Just as with anything else in marketing today, there's a process to follow, a "message architecture" to use when building your brand message.





Best in
the World

Differentiation Triangle

You'll start with two homework projects:

Answer the three "Best in the Worlds."

Jim Collins wrote about identifying what your company is Best in the World at doing in his classic *Good to Great*. He wrote that it's important to understand not just what you're good at but what you do that's truly "Best in the World" status. It's an intimidating question, a high bar, and he meant it that way.

To get to this answer for your company, we create what we call a "differentiation triangle" by giving executives and sales leaders (those who talk to customers) a questionnaire with three questions: What are we Best in the World at providing? What are our competitors Best in the World at providing? What do your customers NEED you to be Best in the World at providing?

After they complete the questionnaire (on their own, without sharing answers!), we work with leadership to uncover gaps and misalignments. It's common for executives not to know the answers or to have different answers or to have items on their lists that truly aren't differentiated at all. It's common to find companies that are Best in the World at delivering something that misaligns with what they come to understand their customers NEED.

Good messaging begins with creating understanding and alignment on how you've answered these Best in the World questions.



Interview customers to get your "only, trigger and switch" messages.

Any messaging project that doesn't include customer interviews is going to be biased by definition. Customer interviews ensure that you're connected to the market, and they give you tremendous insight into what your competitors are doing. It's amazing what you learn when you ask – and listen!

These interviews form the core of any good message exercise, because they provide you with the chance to ask questions about what "triggered" their purchase, and what would get them to switch. So few message platforms include the answers to these questions! But they're critical for building a strong message architecture.

You'll ask your customers what led them to first contact you, to research solutions to the problem that led them to you. What was the incident that triggered that search for you? What were they looking to solve? Was it hard to find a solution? Why was it important to solve that problem now if it was a long-standing problem? What made it a priority all of a sudden? Those answers form your trigger messages, and you'll build your content around speaking to those answers.

Next, you'll ask about switch messages. Few products or services are sold to a customer for the very first time, as a new category. More often, the purchase is a switch from buying something else or a process change from some other approach. What would it take to get a customer to switch from a competitive product/service to you? A product can be 25% better or more efficient, but sometimes that's not enough to justify the cost and effort of making a vendor or solution change. Does it have to be 50% better? 100% better? Does it have to offer some component never available before? Without knowing the answer to your switch message, you can't create a message platform that's compelling enough to drive brand preference. You'll stop short at brand awareness, without taking the story all the way it needs to go.

You'll be surprised to hear that a dozen customer interviews that last 30 minutes each are all it takes to get your only, trigger and switch messages down. You can't get it from a survey but from deep listening to customer comments – what they say, and what they're not saying.

We encourage companies to do these customer interviews every year. It's amazing what you hear, and you'll remain connected to your customers at a much deeper level.



Now you have access to so much more information that you didn't have before. It's time to articulate the brand, by following this message architecture:

1. Identify the Brand Voice.

In 50 words, what is your differentiated message that you bring to customers? They can only get this from you, and they NEED this to run their own businesses. You're going to pull from your Best in the World column for this, as well as what your customers NEED you to be best at providing. Speak to your customers – what is it about your company/product that is important to customers, that is indispensable to them?

Yes, it's hard. It's supposed to be. And that's why so many company messages miss the mark. Marketers HAVE to put in the time to figure this out, and many don't.

Enter your Brand Voice statement here:

2. What are my "Only" statements?

How are we or how is this product different/better than competitors? You HAVE to make sure you're speaking about you. We push clients when they're describing new products and services: "Don't tell me what you do; tell me what you do BETTER!" If you can't identify your competitive advantages, you can't create brand preference in any meaningful way.

Try this exercise: go to your competitor's website, and visit the About Us page. Take out their name, and put your company name in its place. Does the text still apply to you both? Or worse, do the same for the text on YOUR OWN About Us page.

If what you say about yourself can just as easily apply to any competitor, that's not a very differentiated message. And it's a bit alarming!

Write your "Only" statements here:



3. Proof points.

Of course, you can't just say you're the best, you have to prove it, and you have to show it. Every company and product needs proof points that provide credibility. It can be a wide variety of proof statements: years in business, serving X% of Fortune 500, customer retention rates, awards, market share, customer testimonials, product certifications, serving on industry committees or commissions, etc. These add credibility and impact to your Only and Best in the World statements and makes them more believable. Don't just tell me you're great — show me!

List your Proof Points here:

4. What are your trigger messages?

Go back to your customer interviews and pull out those initial triggers that led to the start of the sales cycle. Poke at the trigger statements in your mind: What really made it urgent to solve the problem right now? Was it something that had been a problem for a while but suddenly bubbled to the top of the priority list? What change took place that drove it to become a priority?

And we've never liked the retainer model, for the simple reason that both agency and client outgrow it in a flash. Very quickly, one or both of these outcomes occur: the agency feels they're putting in more work than they're being paid for, and the client feels they're paying for work not being done. This is all due to a lack of transparency tied to the retainer model, so we've always favored the more visible budget system that ties dollars to specific campaigns and deliverables. Clients see what we're charging, and they see what they should get for that.

List your Trigger Messages here:



5. Now, the favorite question: what are the “switch messages?”

Getting someone to switch companies is the ultimate marketing challenge, one that people are wired to resist. It’s often awkward, uncomfortable. There’s inertia to overcome, new vendor qualification processes to navigate. For many, a vendor/product switch is the last thing they want to go through.

So you’re really going to have to get this part right. This is the ultimate message challenge, getting beyond what’s NICE to have to what the customer HAS to have. A 25% efficiency improvement may be nice, but to get them to switch, perhaps the efficiency jump has to be 50%, 75%, 100%. You have to know, and your message has to reflect the answers to your switch questions that you got during the customer interviews. Check your Best in the World worksheets as well, to be sure that you’re tied to what customers NEED you to be best at providing. If your switch message doesn’t show up there, you’re not going to be successful getting new customers to come to you because you’re not connected to what they HAVE to have.

Switch messages:

6. Why you win/why you lose.

We’re coming to the home stretch now. You’ve uncovered so much, and now you have to inject the sense of real-world battles into your marketing messaging. Why do you win orders? And why do you lose? There are meetings we have with clients where they’re describing a new product, and it all sounds great. Irresistible. Can’t miss!

So we ask: Well, then, you must get a purchase order after every sales call, right? And of course that’s not the case.

That’s OK. It’s just important to anticipate that reality, and be able to articulate why you win business, and also why you lose. Salespeople need to have clarity on those points, and the sales presentations you build have to account for those win/lose scenarios.

Why you win:

Why you lose:



7. What are your HAVE to haves versus NICE to haves?

We go to meetings with clients who talk about how their product or solution is truly irresistible. And many are. But often companies and engineers confuse what someone thinks is nice with something they'll actually pull out their checkbook and pay for. If the product was truly that irresistible, then you'd have a purchase order after every meeting. Sadly, that's not the case.

The difference between a nice meeting and a meeting that converts to an order depends on whether you're using HAVE to have messages in your materials and presentations, rather than talking about advantages that are only nice to have. A small productivity improvement may be nice to have, but not enough to compensate for the difficulties of making a process change or installing new equipment. But if that productivity advantage jumped to doubling or tripling of your production capacity, suddenly your product moves over to a HAVE to have solution. Whatever the message is, it's important that you are critical of yourself, and truly understand what motivates a customer to buy, rather than just nod their heads.

Have to haves:	Nice to haves:



8. "Sell against" messages.

You know, you DO have competitors. They're out there saying terrible things about you every day! And that's OK, as long as we arm our sales teams with counters to the claims, both accurate and inaccurate, that we hear in the market from our competitors.

Competitors will claim that your product is unproven, that your company is too far to service them, that your people aren't skilled enough. You've heard it all, so include all of the comments your salespeople are likely to hear and give them the right counterarguments to use so they have them available as an immediate response DURING the sales call. That's far more persuasive than the "I'll get back to you on that" response. When they say X, you say Y.

Sell against messages:

Now you have all the components of a truly differentiated, compelling message architecture, one that is connected to customer priorities and one that ONLY you can say. Finalize all this onto a single page, and publish it within the company so everyone has it. You'll create alignment on the message and your position in the market, so everyone is using the same language when they talk to customers. It will drive your content and branding programs, with the consistency and repetition any marketing program needs to create true impact in the market.

About Us

Goldstein Group Communications (GGC) creates high impact branding and lead generation programs for B2B companies that are seeking more powerful ways to find and keep customers. The company specializes in Marketing to Engineers and has a long track record in writing engineer-to-engineer technical copy that other agencies struggle to produce. GGC was founded in 1992 as a public relations agency and today represents both entrepreneurial and billion-dollar multi-national firms throughout the country, with 50% of revenues coming from clients outside Ohio. GGC combines both left-brain analytics with right-brain creativity to provide a powerful marketing approach that leads to "Measurably Better Marketing."

