



Creating a Truly Remarkable Professional Services Marketing

Approach: Six Steps to Success

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For every professional services firm, the ability to maintain focus in the marketplace is a mandatory imperative for both effective performance today and building competitive advantage in the future. Focus is important to all businesses, but it's vital to professional services organizations because the "means of production" occurs between the ears of a finite group of consultants. Thus, using valuable resources (personnel) on noncore activities is wasted opportunity. In fact, a just-published research study shows that practices that create consistent focus are important differentiators between top-performing services organizations (61 percent average gross margins) and their lower-performing counterparts (26 percent average gross margins).¹

Creating and keeping this focus is a core element of marketing's mission. To deliver on this goal, marketing must:

- Identify and prioritize high-potential market segments, customers, and offerings.
- Define the organization's unique value proposition.
- Direct organizational resources at these select targets.
- Communicate this focus, this message, consistently both outside and inside the organization.

But how do you create a truly successful marketing program that is razor-sharp today and robust enough to withstand the test of time—an approach that radiates a powerful market message and articulates your company's promise to potential buyers of your services? The good news is that every services firm has the potential to execute at the top of its game, reaching the right client base with the right message at the right time.

Figure 1



Whether it's to accelerate services sales growth, validate market positioning, identify your true market potential, or build your services brand, there are six steps you need to follow to be successful in creating a "professional services 'go-to-market' approach" (*Figure 1*). Like most things in life, temptation often drives us to jump to the last step, skipping over the prerequisite requirements to get to the answer quickly without exercising the discipline and commitment to follow all the right steps to reach service marketing goals. We suggest patience, as your discipline will be rewarded.

Step One: Discover Market Reality

Knowing which path to follow in creating a services marketing strategy requires conducting both an internal and an external marketing assessment. Without market research, your bet on the future alignment, service needs, support, positioning, and brand congruence may fall apart quickly. Placing the right strategic marketing wager requires that you take a look outside to discover what is in your marketplace: the competitive market position, customer (current, old, and prospective) mindsets and expectations, and market issues and trends.

Furthermore, the internal marketing assessment takes a look inside and is accomplished by interviewing a sample of key stakeholders at all levels of the organization. The results often yield interesting (and sometimes surprising) results. For example, knowledge of a competitor's market message, approach, and promotional efforts often can be unearthed without costly external research by talking to members of your own staff who have worked at competitors' firms. In addition, through interviews and focus groups, you will be able to better understand how your own organizational professionals see the professional services world from the inside out. Many kernels of knowledge can be harvested by simply asking.

The Marketing and Branding Assessment instrument in *Figure 2* can add the reality-based quantitative data and evidence you need to make sound professional services marketing decisions.²

Externally, your market discovery and assessment should

provide you with a complete understanding of your markets, competitors, and customers. To accomplish this, focus on three elements:

1. Segmentation. Segmenting your market provides you with insight into the workings of the market, including important trends influencing prospective buyer behaviors, needs, industry forces, and market direction. Examining horizontal, vertical, and channel markets as well can be quite insightful as companies merge, acquire, and incubate new service offerings. Segmentation is important because you need to be in alignment with how you segment your own markets and clients and collect data that reflects how you face that marketplace for the greatest impact.

2. Client Research. Many times, professional services firms assume they understand customer needs, new buyer behaviors, and emerging marketplace requirements. Yet, our experience is that this is often incorrect. As the pace of change continues to ramp up, what was hard fact six months ago is fiction today. Further complicating this is that as firms continually restructure their services function, new players begin to emerge. A person who once headed the European services group may now be in charge of outsourcing and North American sales. Issues, expectations, and needs reflect both the individual and the organiza-

tional position they assume. In this regard, conducting an analysis of the organizational structure of that company is not enough. You also will need to create a “power map” of the organization that not only identifies who the key decision makers are, but also the influencers, advisors, and line staff chartered with responsibility to implement services.

Our personal preference in conducting client research is that (1) it is predominantly qualitatively focused and (2) the research team is made up of both outside professional researchers *and* managers and executives of the organization. The qualitative one-on-one interviews and focus groups allow the investigators to go beyond surface responses to gain information that is both “rich” and “thick,” providing the rationale behind answers and deeper insights. For the complex issues of professional services, this is a must. Furthermore, if done correctly, the information you collect in personal meetings with clients and customers can help you understand high-potential new service offerings, shifts in existing needs, and service line integration issues, as well as current gaps where the client is looking for some assistance and help.

Outside researchers can add professionalism to the information-gathering process coupled with solid analytic support. However, since market research reports too often gather dust

Figure 2

Marketing and Branding Assessment					
Today	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>			<i>Strongly Agree</i>	
1. Most prospective clients in your defined market have heard of you.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Most prospective clients in your defined market have a clear perception about you (what you do and how well you do it).	1	2	3	4	5
3. Most prospective clients have a favorable perception of your professional services organization.	1	2	3	4	5
4. You have the reputation as the leader in your field.	1	2	3	4	5
Tomorrow					
5. Your executives recognize that the brand is a vital asset.	1	2	3	4	5
6. All “packaging” (people, communications, pricing, materials, offices, etc.) conveys the same message/brand congruence.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Your professional services organization makes a conscious effort to delight customers on selected projects.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Branding campaigns are funded aggressively.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Branding awareness is tracked.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Brand quality is tracked.	1	2	3	4	5
Total Score = _____					

on management shelves, steps should be taken to motivate action. Getting your executives to step up to the plate to interview a cross section of your best customers not only goes a long way in demonstrating your commitment to partnership and continuing a strong relationship with the client/customer, but it also helps gain the buy-in and commitment of these execs for making positive changes. This is a powerful tool in building confidence in the research findings and creating urgency to take action.

3. Competitive Analysis. Understanding your competitive posture provides you with the hard reality of how your competitors go to market. This type of analysis helps you understand the strengths, weaknesses, differentiators, and message profiles of your key competition. In addition, you can ascertain how they price, structure, and deliver their services, and what key market messages they are positioning for maximum impact. Most important, this type of analysis allows you to understand fully the gaps in the marketplace and how your services firm can meet those needs. Competitor research will yield a clear view of the types of market messages your competitors are placing into the market for general consumption.

Following are four types of market messages generally seen in the professional services marketplace:

1. The Human Capital Message. The market message with a human capital theme speaks volumes about your people, your thought leadership, how you train professionals, what schools they have attended, and how you can solve any problem due to intellectual prowess. This type of message also says: "We have built a culture where only the best people can reside. We are very selective. We invest in our people so that you receive competence, confidence, and capability on each professional services assignment. When you buy our services, you not only receive the best potential solution for your problems, but there is no second-tier bench in our firm." Strategy firms in particular strive to incorporate the human capital message in all their marketing efforts.

2. The Team Integration Message. The team integration message addresses how you, as a company, will be in the same boat with your client, rowing in the same direction and creating common fate and shared destiny teamwork. This message says: "We are not robots who simply push you aside and deliver solutions. We involve your staff in projects, create high levels of communication, and share ideas, feelings, and emotions as well as creative ideas to solve problems." Sometimes these messages also address elements such as fear, wholeness, and togetherness as a way to solve any problem that arises. The culture of this type of firm usually supports this theme internally by investing in client relationships and engagement and team skills training for all consultants and project staff.

In addition, this type of message highlights the sense of

partnership and the value placed on long-term relationships that are grounded in trust, integrity, expressing concerns, and celebrating victories together. In the early days of e-commerce, many market messages highlighted how clients should be concerned with working with a firm that did not understand their unique needs and culture. What became important in these market messages was having a trusted advisor who understands the client's business, who they personally like to work with, and who is also worthy of consideration in their selection process.

3. The Risk Avoidance Message. The risk avoidance message communicates to clients that you have been down this road before and know all the danger areas as well as the pitfalls that should be avoided in order to save time and money. This message says that you know how to manage change during periods of transition and are very savvy in predicting risk and avoiding problems. During the heyday of SAP installations and CRM consulting marketing, we saw quite a bit of risk avoidance messages in the marketplace. The themes were, "This stuff can be tricky," and "Don't try it at home without assistance"—sound advice and consultation from a firm that has done it all in most industries around the globe.

In typical risk avoidance messages, you also will see service guarantees and service level agreements as part of every engagement. Areas of risk, quality, security, consistency, accuracy, cost escalation, and response time to crisis situations are clearly laid out and inherent in the overall professional services engagement model. The message is always clear: "Perhaps you will not be able to completely control the world, but we can help you feel more secure in the areas where we work with you on this engagement."

4. The Practical Message. The practical market message is simple, direct, and to the point: "We may not be fancy, but we get the job done quickly at a reasonable cost in a manner that results in high customer satisfaction." This market message leverages the underlying philosophy that services solutions need not be too complicated and that the results really matter. Practical market messages also highlight solutions that can be easily transferred back to your staff, making knowledge transfer a strong feature and a benefit to working with your firm. Everyone likes to apply lessons learned from a project. The practical market message helps your client see that each time he begins a new project, he will not have to start with a clean sheet of paper.

In summary, the creation of the right market message that you can stand behind and deliver against has to be well-thought out and market-tested. It is often difficult to position yourself in all four areas, but starting in one area and building up to the others is certainly realistic. You also can develop a strategy that refines each message against the particular service offering you want to communicate and position within a certain

industry that demonstrates certain market characteristics; a culture of low risk, high risk, high touch, that is fast moving with complex problems, or a mature industry that is looking for a single partner to stand beside in the journey.

Step Two: Create the Strategy

The second step in your professional services market development process is to organize an off-site meeting with key executives, shareholders, and selective line staff. The goal of this type of meeting is to create a high-level strategic roadmap, complete with a focus to build your services practice. It is appropriate that you utilize an outside facilitator for this kind of event. You all have heard the saying, “You are never a prophet in your own home.” Having a seasoned professional services consulting firm help you design and facilitate the meeting is worth it. In addition to keeping everyone on target, consultants can provide an outside perspective on where your market is headed as well as provide you feedback on the real-

Placing the right strategic marketing wager requires that you take a look both outside, to discover what is in your marketplace, and inside, to assess the perceptions of the key stakeholders within your organization.

ity specific to your strategic marketing plan. A strategic marketing planning off-site meeting should have the following components and outcomes:

- Market research findings.
- Creation of your marketing vision and guiding principles.
- Definition of the future professional services environment.
- Definition of your sustainable competitive advantage.
- Definition of your services portfolio future mix and markets.
- Critical priorities that will determine your success.
- A customer strategy.
- A pricing strategy.
- A branding strategy.
- A promotion budget.
- Development of your performance market drivers.
- A go-forward plan and process: Who, what, when, where, how, and why.

Keep in mind that the strategy session is a bit like navigating a ship through rocky waters. To successfully come through it with a high degree of satisfaction, a combination of elements and processes must come together: solid market research, excellent facilitator skills, an open mind to challenge

assumptions, and the ability to place your bets in the right areas to leverage existing services or to break new ground.

In addition, an outcome of the marketing strategy exercise is the determination of which services you can perform really well, requiring a stronger emphasis in your overall marketing approach. Keep in mind that you probably can do only a few things really well, given limited resources. You have only so much time and opportunity.

Step Three: Build Market Communications

Step Three in the services marketing process focuses on creating an approach on how best to educate your marketplace on your core competencies and how to package these attributes for maximum market effectiveness. Typically, this process requires a series of small group sessions with various internal and external groups. The goal of these sessions is to create communications vehicles that align and link several key factors:

- How best to inform, educate, and create awareness in defined markets.
- How best to package each component to gain competitive advantage.
- How to communicate to various markets and segments of your client base.
- How to integrate your activities with your key service offerings.
- How to create “word of mouth” and “word of mouse” effectively.

It would be a mistake as part of your overall communications process to leave out the concept of brand. As a service organization, your people are the first and foremost representations of your professional services brand. All of your staff communicates your brand in many ways. The way you talk about what the firm stands for, the way you listen to clients’ concerns, and the way you respond to those concerns make a powerful impression. Also, ensuring a consistent look and feel in brochures, Web pages, stationery, and project communications creates a sense of grounding and a well-organized company. When customers trust your brand, they are more willing to trust your firm in the development of a mutual value exchange. Some services brands carry enormous market weight. IBM Global Services, GE, McKinsey, Accenture, and several software companies have leveraged their professional services market plays into 40 percent margins.

In crystallizing your final market messages and value proposition, you will want to conduct a message audit at least every year as an alignment exercise to ensure that you have successfully tailored your messages to each segment and channel. Each part of this audit process should have a market calculation that provides you feedback on the overall effectiveness of the market message to guide future media decisions

and to refine future messages.

Listed below are a few ways to communicate your brand to target markets that are worthy of discussion:

- Sponsor an executive forum, conference, or sporting event tied in with case highlights that support your key market message and give visibility to your brand.
- Organize or participate in an electronic magazine that pulls together thought leadership articles from key firms in your industry. Each article is linked to the author's home page and key service offerings. These venues not only allow you to promote your brand, but also to share with your audience the full scope of your service offerings and what your brand represents.
- Focused advertising and inserts in conference presentations, lunch-and-learn sessions with key management market leaders, and gifts that highlight a particular theme with an invitation to meet are other good approaches to communicate your brand effectively. One firm in particular, Instinctive, did a nice job in leveraging its brand. Its campaign included a golf ball and putter with the name of the company and an invitation to meet with them. The key message was that you could spend more time playing golf if you were more efficient in your group projects by using their project communications software.
- Have your staff write articles, make presentations at conferences, and participate in local networking events. Think about the impact on your brand if, for example, you conducted a pre-conference industry workshop and your company name, logo, and personal background were distributed to 30,000 potential attendees. Sometimes it's difficult to make the time to write articles and submit abstracts to conference sponsors, but the payoffs are quite high if done effectively. These venues also provide you an opportunity to co-present with clients a successful case study that helps potential clients relate to the problem-solution that is presented.

Step Four: Create Your Market Story

Step Four highlights the uniqueness of your professional services firm within the context of various creative themes that grab market attention. This particular step requires your firm to fully understand your competitor's market story and how to direct public relations efforts to get your name in print, in CEO interviews, or in quick perspectives on breaking stories. For example, since the Arthur Andersen difficulties, many accounting firm consulting experts are being quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Consulting* magazine, and others regarding their perspectives on the Big Five consulting firms.

At the heart of building your market story is the concept

of creating a "tag line" that inspires and educates the marketplace. These tag lines highlight your professional services strengths and differentiators. Your tag lines should be considered as the first chapter of the story you want to tell. Like a trailer in a movie, the goal is to position the tag line as a platform to hook both the emotional and service impact of what you offer. Ultimately, it's what's behind the tag line that makes a difference. There are some interesting tag lines being portrayed in the marketplace (*Figure 3*). You be the judge as to how effectively they motivate, educate, communicate a promise, or position a competency that you will remember.

Figure 3

Tag Line Examples	
"Ideas for a Small Planet"	IBM
"As Individual As You"	Triple-I Systems Consultants
"Inspirational Technology"	Compaq
"Inspire the Next"	Hatachi
"We're Engineers, We Know This Stuff"	Phillips 66
"Next Things First"	United Technologies
"Experts in S-Business"	Alexander Consulting
"We Earn Your Trust Every Day"	CPA Society
"The Possibilities are Infinite"	Fujitsu Consulting Services

Step Five: Build Internal Staff Capability

Step Five is about training your professional services staff in two specific areas: how to market and sell professional services.³ Keep in mind that your professional services, products groups, and marketing staff all need to be on the same page. Without this internal congruence, many disconnects usually occur. The marketing staff needs to fully understand what the life cycle looks like in selling services so that a high level of integration with outward market-facing campaigns work. On the other hand, the professional services sales force needs to be bonded at the hip as to what the marketing department is planning and promoting so they can move concepts to the front of the table. One quick way to accomplish this mutual objective is to train both groups in techniques for selling and marketing professional services.

Although many sales and marketing courses exist for you to consider, those that include the concepts and tools shown in *Figure 4* usually deliver high value and practical capacity-building for your sales and marketing staff.

Step Six: Review, Reinvent, and Reinforce

Step Six of the marketing development process requires you not to be complacent with your existing, even successful services marketing program. What has worked well in the past

Figure 4

Sales and Marketing Training—Key Concepts and Themes

- Marketing and Professional Services Trends and Best Practices.
- How to Sell the Invisible.
- Services Marketing Branding and Value-Proposition Creation.
- Aligning the Marketing Plan with Professional Services Strategy.
- Assessing Your Key Market Messages.
- Selling Complex, Large-Scale Service Engagements.
- How to Build Your Professional Services Brand.
- How to Communicate Your Core Competencies to Key Services Markets.
- Building Client Relationship Skills.
- Selling Services through Key Events Planning.
- How to Reduce the Costs of Professional Services Sales.
- Measuring the Impact of Services Marketing.
- How to Align the Marketing and Sales Organizations.
- Managing the Transition from Product Sales and Marketing to Services Sales and Marketing.
- How to Educate Your Marketplace.
- Building Brand Congruence Inside and Outside the Company.
- Reality Can Be a Tough Teacher! Case Studies of Winners in Services Marketing.
- Building an Integrated Sales and Services Marketing Team.
- How to Create a Successful Marketing Plan.
- Market Messages, Positioning, and Market Intelligence: Birds of a Feather.

can be reinforced to reflect changing market conditions and customer needs as well as your capacity to deliver new and enhanced services to the marketplace. Given that, there is value in reviewing, at least yearly, your overall marketing plan, key messages, and market position. Reinvent, if necessary, and certainly reinforce those ideas that have delivered the kind of results you expected.

As part of the review, reinvent, and reinforcement cycle, it is important to ensure that you are up-to-date in incorporating marketing best practices into your overall process. Recent research indicates that there are 12 marketing best practices that leading professional services companies utilize in striving to become best-in-class marketing organizations:⁴

1. A service marketing plan is in place.
2. The services value proposition is understood clearly by all stakeholders.
3. Value-based pricing is the most common pricing method.
4. A dedicated marketing staff is in place.
5. Ongoing market research is conducted.
6. Information on services is only one click away from the home page.
7. Customers are segmented by loyalty and profitability.

8. Building the brand and communicating key market messages are organizational objectives.
9. Branding campaigns are funded aggressively.
10. All “packaging” (people, communications, pricing, physical environment) conveys the same message.
11. The services brand is congruent with the product brand.
12. The external and internal market messages are congruent.

Bottom line, services marketing speaks loudly to everything you would like the market to know about you. At its highest level, it’s a relationship between you and your clients and customers that integrates emotion, knowledge, and motivation. Strive for the high road in all your services marketing efforts and you will create a truly re-

markable journey.

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