



How Visible Are You?

By Trish Brock

One question we are all hearing too often these days is, “I haven’t heard much about Company XYZ recently ... anyone know how they’re doing?”

At a dinner with some business associates recently, one person shared that she was about to make a big purchase but decided against buying from one company because their proposal and supporting documents were tired, old looking and the information was not presented in a particularly professional manner. I think she used the word “lame.”

She also commented—and this is important—that they gave the impression they weren’t going to be around much longer.

The information she was given could easily have been just as on-target as the other companies she considered, but all things being equal, the company with “lame” materials was quickly eliminated because of the weak impression it projected.

After all, why would anyone want to do business with a company that by all appearances seems to be struggling or even going out of business?

It continues to amaze me when I hear company principals talk about wanting increased visibility in the market and how much they admire another company’s brand, but then they fail to take action to develop a powerful identity for their own dealership.

Most owners understand that a strong identity in the community promotes business, helps attract prospective customers and opens doors for sales people, yet many choose to do nothing but talk about it.

Using dated materials, throwing information together on letterhead and hoping it passes as a professional overview, or worse, expecting sales people to create something new for each presentation or bid response often seems to be the norm these days.

Some dealers assume customers will view them as professional problem-solvers and expect them to invest money in their business by awarding them projects, yet they fail to invest in their own business to promote it.

I can’t help asking where this attitude comes from. Is it all too much trouble? Too expensive? Don’t they know how? Don’t they have time? Are they just too busy? Or

is it simply not that important?

Do dealer owners and managers really think that approach makes for a more cost-effective, attractive and consistent communication vehicle? And who do they think is calling on customers if their sales people are spending valuable time sitting at their computers putting their own sales materials together?

In this age of information, it’s easy for customers to compare you to your competition. Are you doing all you can to make sure the comparison they make comes out in your favor? Let’s review:

Your materials project your dealership’s image.

Right, wrong or indifferent, it’s true. Is it the image you want? As you talk about your ability to offer superior products and services over your competitors and partner with your clients now and into the future, do your materials support your claims? Are they well designed, tell your differentiating story and compel buyers to follow your lead?

An old corporate brochure talking about

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how long you have been in business or bid responses that look like everyone else's may be sending the wrong signals and weakening your credibility.

Are your materials informative and relevant to your customers' needs?

What is important to you may not be to prospective customers. Telling them how great you are is fine, but more importantly, how does this translate into benefits to them? Why does it matter? And how does that make you different and presumably better, than your competitor down the street?

Sales support materials are NOT a waste of money!

Too often, dealer principals believe that spending money on sales support materials is a waste of money because, I have frequently heard, the materials quickly become outdated and/or the sales people don't use them. If this sounds familiar, please keep reading.

Materials can be designed so that they can be continually updated, especially when developed and used electronically.

If sales people aren't using the materials currently available to them, it's likely the materials simply aren't relevant.

Sales people want and need all the help they can get.

Ask them what they need and then give it to them. They want to be as successful as you want them to be.

Don't wait until your sales somehow get better before developing new materials. Expecting your sales people to compete without the tools they need is like telling a football team that when they win a few more games, you will buy them helmets and pads.

Sales materials should support the consultative sales process.

Do sales people have a variety of pieces to access when discussing the multiple aspects of furniture projects? Or when various topics are brought up by prospects,

are sales people expected to develop their own with which to respond?

It's interesting to note that a large percentage of sales people admit to altering sales materials given to them in order to make them more functional and pertinent.

If materials are developed without the input of the people who are going to use them, then it could be a poor investment. Unless you have been in the trenches with them and are clear about the obstacles they face daily, don't assume you know what they need.

Differentiate your dealership.

Your sales materials represent a wonderful opportunity to set yourself apart, both visually and with your messaging. Make a statement. Be bold. Be creative. Be fun. Your sales people are dying to be different from the folks down the street—give them the tools to do so.

With single-digit margins and buyers' perceptions of furniture as a commodity these days, it is more important than ever to set yourself apart.

If you don't believe you are different and therefore better, then why should prospective customers? And how would they know if you don't consistently broadcast your differentiating message to the marketplace?

Make them beautiful.

This industry has a fashion element to it so it's important to look the part. You have an important message—make your audience want to read it.

The A&D community is automatically drawn to visually stunning materials and so are many of your customers. Your materials can and should be inspiring.

No one wants to look at ugly, and it's guaranteed that the white, three-ring binder with letterhead slipped into the plastic cover will be the last one picked from the conference table full of bid responses.

It signals boring, status quo and "don't expect innovative ideas here," even if it may well come chock full of them.

There is no question that this is a difficult economy for dealers. But some are doing well in spite of the challenges.

Many say that their aggressive marketing efforts have made the difference in their ability to be top of mind in the market and win business.

Often it is because their competition isn't as visible and engaged in projecting a strong image. By default, they create a perception of being less viable, much like the company described in the above story that lost business as a result.

Unless you are in a market where there is no competition or your business is so good that you might as well be minting money, powerful and supportive sales materials are not optional—they are a requirement.

They are part of being in the game and doing business in this era, and certainly in this economy.

If all of this sounds like a lot of work, ask yourself this: How much will it cost my business not to be visible and am I leaving my market to wonder how we are doing and if we are still around?



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