

Differentiate or Diminish

*The Art and Necessity of
Business Positioning*

By Kevin B. Levi

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Differentiation is a business imperative today, not only in terms of a company's success, but also for its continuing survival.

Truly understanding how and why you and your business are better than the competitors' is essential to true business success.

Succinctly and effectively communicating your value proposition to customers and substantiating your claims will drive your business.

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- **Founder and President, Winning Message, LLC. (www.winningmessage.com)**
- **Former Senior Manager of Strategic Customer Messaging for a Fortune 1,000 pharmaceutical company**
- **Former Director of Strategic Accounts for a top-10 global Public Relations agency**
- **Author of SHRED (novel available on Amazon.com, Bn.com, Borders.com)**
- **Performed branding and messaging work for various business-to-business and business-to-consumer companies, including the following:**

Acclaro Growth Partners (management consulting)
Advantage Healthcare Solutions (medical software)
Connotate Technologies (enterprise software)
Health Action Synergies
Human Inference (data optimization software)
Nastel (enterprise software)
Northern Lights Canada (human services)
Restaurant Coaching Solutions
Romaine's Restaurant
Tandem Solution (IT training consultant)
Tomra (recycling services)
TradeVec (online trading software)
WirelessGuys (wireless integration services)

Differentiate or Diminish

About the Author	4
Chapter 1: The Power of Positioning	6
Chapter 2: A Key Messaging Framework	14
Chapter 3: The Ten Second Elevator Pitch	18
Chapter 4: Taking Message Development into Your Own Hands	22
Chapter 5: Examples of Key Messages from (Anonymous) Well Known Brands	34
Chapter 6: The Effectiveness of a Customer Value Model SM	38
Chapter 7: Where do you go from Here?	42

Chapter 1: The Power of Positioning

Just the other day, I received one of those impromptu, unsolicited telephone sales pitches from a poorly prepared salesperson. This individual – let’s call him Rick – didn’t even let me say hello before he launched into his 85-90 second speech. This tactic was obviously deliberate and intended to keep me from having a chance to say “I’m not interested.” You know the type of salesperson I’m describing.

We have all received these calls, whether it is at our office on a Tuesday morning or at home at 8:59 p.m. on a Sunday night. They are dreadful, and we consider them invasions of our privacy.

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In the first 5 seconds of the call, I could tell that Rick's pitch was grossly inadequate and incapable of delivering a message that could potentially resonate with a potential buyer. It was apparent that his marketing team had not armed him with impactful key messages that would serve as viable sales entry points into any sales call.

Intrigued by Rick's laughable sales tactics and intending to have some fun, I allowed him to call me back at a better time.

During my second call from "Rick" I learned that he was trying to sell me online services for managing my company's sales collateral and internal marketing materials. At the end of "Rick's" poor presentation, I declined his services.

Let me share with you the essence of "Rick's" sales pitch as a means of introducing the essential components of effective differentiation and positioning statements that will help your salespeople to sell.

Inhale.

"Hi, my name is Rick So-and-So, and I'm calling from XYZ Corporation...makers of Web content development solutions...we help numerous companies

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today manage their content, so they can access *it* easily and quickly without having to search through their desktops or corporate networks to find *it*... We are one of the world's leading Web content development solutions providers and would love the opportunity to come present to you in person... We really feel like we can help your business save time and money... Would you be interested in setting up an appointment for us to come in and demonstrate how our Web content development solutions can help you and your business succeed in the marketplace?"

Exhale.

* * *

From this ineffective, inarticulate sales pitch, I was left with several obvious questions:

1. What are web content development solutions?
2. Which of my current business challenges will these solutions help me address?
3. How does XYZ Corporation define "web content"?
4. How do these supposed solutions help me save time and money?

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5. Why do I want to schedule an appointment if I don't understand what they are trying to sell me?

The often-used phrases such as "...saving time and money..." are no longer enough to attract a potential buyer. Today's effective salesperson must offer compelling claims and proof to substantiate them.

* * *

Differentiation in the context of business is what a company can hang its hat on that no other business can. For example, for some companies this is being the least expensive. Other companies credit themselves with being the first or the fastest. Whatever it is a business can use to stand out from the rest is called differentiation.

Differentiation in today's over-crowded marketplace is a business imperative, not only in terms of a company's success, but also for its continuing survival.

The advent of the Internet changed the business landscape forever. Typically, long established "brick-and-mortar" businesses that spent years and millions of dollars building their brands ruled their industry segments – perhaps

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rightfully so. Now, however, with new web-based businesses coming online virtually every day, many of these former stalwart business entities have seen their product/service offerings fall victim to mass commoditization and price wars.

Business-to-business companies in particular are finding themselves in these lowest-price battles every time they try to win client business. To me, this means the main players in the industry are not standing out from one another. They aren't differentiating themselves effectively enough.

Take any service-based industry today, for example – IT services, business consulting, legal consultation, etc. To the potential client, most of the major players look the same. All offer the main table stake services and do little to truly *differentiate* themselves from their competitors. A business prospect is left with only one choice – defer to the best price.

As business owners and managers, it is our job to mitigate or avoid these price battles by delivering to the client enticing key messages that peak their interest and satisfy their concerns.

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When crafted and delivered in an impactful manner, a business's key messages will help it to differentiate itself from its competitors and attract customers.

In my nearly ten years of key message development, I have come across some really ornate positioning statements, key messages and value propositions that unnecessarily used far too many elaborate words to make a point. Here are some examples:

- *XXXX offers best-of-breed legal services to companies that need reliability and security so they can perform at the highest level.*
- *XXXX delivers value to global organizations through integrated financial services designed to help reduce cost and increase efficiency.*
- *XXXX provides its customers with state-of-the-art solar solutions to harness the power of the sun to lower costs.*
- *We help individuals market their ideas through innovation and precision. Our services increase value and decrease inefficiency while driving differentiation in the marketplace.*

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- *Our powerful software is flexible, intuitive, easy-to-use and integrates seamlessly with your other tools. It is robust and scalable, and your organization can enjoy the benefits of our best-of-breed world-class offering.*

Certainly, the name of the company behind these statements can easily be substituted for a competitor. What do these statements tell you about these companies and why you should engage in business with them? Nothing! That is the point. So many companies today fall into the trap of utilizing overused or meaningless words to describe what they do. It just doesn't work.

Here are some examples of words to avoid at all costs in your positioning and messaging. They do absolutely nothing to truly differentiate you or your business:

Advanced
Best
Best-of-breed
Committed
Cutting-edge
Dedicated
Easy-to-use
Elaborate

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Fastest
Flexible
Industry leading
Innovative
Leader
Leading
One-of-a-kind
Optimize
Partner
Proven
Quality
Quickest
Robust
Scalable
Solution
State-of-the-art
Unique
Unparalleled
Unsurpassed
Value
World-class

While this list is not a full representation of all of the trite words to stay away from, it should give you an idea of just how easy it can be to fall into the trap of developing key messages that will fall on deaf ears.

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Chapter 2: A Key Messaging Framework

An effective framework for differentiating a business's value should start with a powerful positioning statement: a memorable, impactful, concise sentence that tells people what you do, how you are different and what value you will provide to them. If your salespeople are not able to deliver this top-line sales pitch - and have the recipient understand it in the time it takes to go up two flights on an elevator - it is not effective and needs to be redeveloped.

In the instance where the elevator gets stuck or the ride simply takes longer than it should, your salespeople should also be armed with fact-supported differentiating messages to further

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persuade, if necessary. These pointed, concise, powerful statements must support the corporate positioning statement and help to prove its viability and legitimacy. These assertions should be no more than one sentence each. Behind each of these messages must be supporting proof points to legitimize each key claim. The key is to have several layers of ammunition to prove your business's worth to a potential client and to make your product or service stand above the competition's.

Following each key message and its supporting proof points should be a customer value statement (or value proposition). This one or two sentence statement clearly articulates to the potential customer what value your product or service will offer them.

Positioning Statements – top line business message designed to stake a claim in the industry and position how customers should perceive the company.

- For example:
 - We are the world's largest...
 - Our company provides senior citizens with the cheapest...

Key Messages – Differentiating claims based on the business or its key products, services, etc.

- For example:

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- Our XYZ product is used today by 67 of the Fortune 100 companies.
- Each member of our management team has successfully launched an initial public offering (IPO).

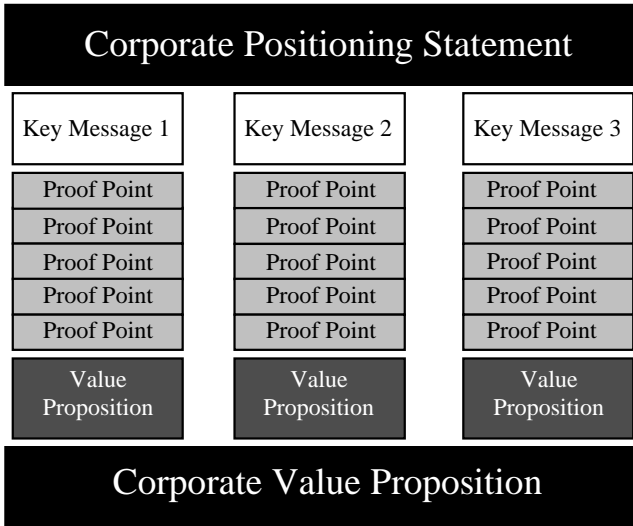
Value Propositions – Statements describing customer value based on the claims made by key messages and positioning statements.

- For example:
 - With key message: Our XYZ product is used today by 67 of the Fortune 100 companies.
 - Value proposition might be:
You can feel assured that our technology is proven and will work as described.
 - With key message: Each member of our management team has successfully launched an initial public offering (IPO).
 - Value proposition could be:
Your money is being put into the hands of a company led by entrepreneurs with a history of success.

This type of “messaging hierarchy” is essential in business, unless you are taking a lowest-cost provider position. This is especially true in the business-to-business marketplace, where the

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value of products and services is not always apparent.



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A framework for constructing your set of positioning statements, key messages and value propositions.

With a complete messaging framework established, an organization has the ammunition needed to effectively differentiate itself from the competition when competing for clients, new hires and leveraging in public relations news copy.

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Chapter 3: The Ten Second Elevator Pitch

Perhaps it is due to my background in Public Relations, but I believe 10 seconds is more than enough time to tell someone what your business offers and how it can benefit them.

I look at the 10-second elevator pitch as a succinct, impactful message that delivers the “what” and “why” of your business to the customer/prospect.

Following is an example of an elevator pitch that only communicates the features of a product or service and not its value or benefit:

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XYZ builds and installs custom, back-office financial software for small businesses.

From this statement it is easy to discern what this company does. However, it does not tell you how this business and its products and services can benefit you. The missing piece in this message is actually what compels individuals to purchase a business's goods and services. Without the stated value to the customer, no true differentiation is communicated.

Here is an example of that same elevator pitch above, with the customer benefit incorporated into the statement:

XYZ builds and installs custom, back-office financial software for small businesses to help simplify and automate their invoicing and payroll processes in order to improve accounting accuracy and efficiency.

From this effectively constructed positioning statement, it is clear that ten seconds is enough time to deliver the sales pitch. If you want your sales associates to create interest for a prospect to learn more about your products and services, you need to keep your messages short and impactful, incorporating both the “what” and the “why” of your offerings. Oftentimes, sales professionals have only seconds to engage a

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prospect on the other end of a cold call, between floors in an elevator, or during a brief encounter at an event.

It is, therefore, an essential business requirement that your customer-facing employees have concise, hard-hitting messages to communicate your business's value, succinctly, to prospects and customers.

Some companies place their elevator pitch on a laminated card and put it in the hands of every employee in the company, just in case the employee comes face to face with a prospective sales opportunity. Isn't this a fantastic idea? Why not? After all, every employee in your company, regardless of their primary role, can serve as an extension of your sales function. This includes the person answering the phone, your accounts receivable person, your delivery person and more.

Below is an example of a simple sales "cheat sheet", containing a company's positioning statement and top-line key messages. It can be laminated and kept in a wallet, purse, portfolio or even a pocket. This document is intended for internal use only.

Imagine one of your employees is in the elevator with a person who just happens to be

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looking for exactly what your company is selling. Now, let us assume this staff member is unprepared to deliver your killer sales message. The opportunity walks right out those doors when they open on the next floor.

Now, imagine that same opportunity arises, but this time the employee is armed with the proper sales pitch. When the opportunity presents itself, the employee introduces him/herself and delivers the message. Is it not possible that the message may peak the interest of the person sharing the elevator, so that he/she agrees to a follow-up discussion? Of course it is. Furthermore, that exceptional opportunity might just turn into a significant sale for your company.

An elevator pitch isn't something magical that shakes money from the trees or is appropriate to use in every situation, but it should be designed to deliver enough impact when used to help foster deeper discussion.

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Chapter 4: Taking Message Development into Your Own Hands

A Five-Phase Message Development Process

Phase 1: SWOTi Analysis

Phase 2: Analysis of Current Messages Utilized:
yours and your key competitors'

Phase 3: Identify Your Company's Key
Differentiators and Most Viable Positioning
Stance

Phase 4: Build Your Messaging Framework

Phase 5: Integrate the New Messages into Your Business Development Engine: sales and marketing tools

PHASE 1: SWOTi Analysis

→ Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (and insights)

Take a holistic view of your business opportunity by assessing your firm's strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of your top competitors. You will then be ready to detail your business opportunities and business threats. This comprehensive view of your market landscape will provide you with the key insights necessary to carve out and stake a niche in your industry, where you can effectively sell and market your products and services.

Below are examples of two SWOTi analyses, one for a business and one for its main competitor. Notice how themes on the left of the chart can carry across from category to category. For this reason, it may be beneficial to start on the left with the "strengths" and move to the right, across the chart.

In these examples, a fifth section labeled "Insights" is included. This section is where you review each row's strengths, weaknesses,

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opportunities and threats and identify the single most important finding or “takeaway” that can significantly impact your business moving forward. These positive or negative components at the end of each row will help you develop your positioning and key messaging statements.

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Example: Your business

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats	Insights
Fastest product in the industry	No customer testimonials	Invest more in research and development	Customers may not perceive speed as very important any longer	Must have customer testimonials to validate claims and demonstrate business improvement
Only company in our space with a global presence	Our product does not interoperate with any other products on the market	Expand into China	Our revenue continues to fall, and we have to make cuts	We must diversify geographically
Multi-lingual staff/strong customer service infrastructure	Continue to have declining revenue	Increase our advertising and Public Relations spend	Our poor customer service denigrates our image	We need to invest in our customer service capabilities
Only all-in-one solution in the market	We are expensive	Buy a competitor	Our top two competitors just merged	Our competitors may soon trump us
We are perceived as the industry's high-end product	We are perceived as too high-end and have positioned ourselves out of the small business market	Introduce a low-cost product or line targeted at small businesses	Our products become commodities	We must have a lower-end solution

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Example: Your top competitor

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats	Learned Insights
Lowest price	Can be perceived as low quality, low end due to pricing	Work to “own” the small business market with its low end solution	May have pigeon-holed themselves out of high-end, large-business deals	Needs to think about a strategy for tapping the large-company market
Highest U.S. market share	Dependent on a continued strong U.S. market	Expand into new geographies	U.S. market demand declines	Must expand geographically
Product is compatible with all competitive and complementary products	Lose control of the customer once he/she chooses to integrate with other vendors’ products	Promote the message that compatibility is imperative in today’s turbulent business environment	Other vendors choose to no longer allow its their products to interoperate with this company’s	Compatibility could be their downfall, rather than their main selling proposition
Only offer select components of a full solution	Can not offer a customer an end-to-end solution	Buy or partner with more companies to offer a full solution	Market demand shifts to a one-stop-shop mentality	May need to expand/round out current portfolio of products

PHASE 2: Analysis of Current Messages Used: Yours and Your Key Competitors'

Capture all of your company's current "messaging" statements and do the same for your top competitors. You will find these messages in a number of locations:

1. Company website
2. Collateral: brochures, sell sheets
3. Sales presentations
4. Trade show booths
5. Business plans
6. Annual reports
7. Press releases
8. Advertisements
9. Presentations: at a trade show, for example)
10. Articles, white papers, etc.

Be sure to capture every statement that appears to position the business in any way, regardless of how effective you believe the message to be. Once you have collected all of this information, populate a spreadsheet in a format similar to the example below in order to analyze the messages your company is currently using and those your key competitors utilize. This will give you a profound window into how each company is trying to market itself to customers and prospects. It will also help you understand best

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how to position your business, products and services, relative to your competition.

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Sample Spreadsheet

	Your company (example of an industrial equipment contractor)	Key Competitor(s)
Corporate positioning statement	Whether you are a large industrial contractor or a small commercial business, we can assist your company to improve operating efficiency and maximize profits. No matter the industry or job requirements, you can rely on XYZ Company for all of your new and used equipment, rental, and service needs.	ABC Equipment Rental serves as a vital and trusted partner for thousands of customers in construction, industrial, petrochemical, governmental, and manufacturing businesses across the United States, Canada and Mexico. By providing timely rentals, maintenance, service, and sales of new and used equipment, tools, and parts, we help our customers do their jobs more efficiently and more profitably.
Key message 1	We feature top brands that are unmatched in their class for functionality and versatility. Our Utility Division provides responsive and reliable power with unparalleled productivity and fuel efficiency.	ABC prides itself on helping its customers maximize productivity by its commitment to availability, reliability and service.

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Key message 2	We work with manufacturers from around the world to bring you the most technologically advanced machinery that incorporates the performance, dependability, and features you need to get the job done right - no matter what the application.	ABC has also built a high level of customer trust and satisfaction through their equipment availability and reliability, strong geographic presence, premium service, and unparalleled value.
Key message 3	Industry leading customer service and support coupled with the area's best response time is what differentiates XYZ Company from other distributors.	RSC Equipment Rental regularly offers top quality used equipment for purchase in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.
Differentiation claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unparalleled productivity and fuel efficiency • Most technologically advanced machinery • Industry-leading customer service and support • The area's best response time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second-largest construction equipment rental company in the U.S. • Over 5,000 employees and 450 locations across the U.S. and in parts of Canada.

NOTE: You should do this with all of your top-tier competitors.

PHASE 3: Identify Your Company’s Key Differentiators and Most Viable Positioning Stance

Every company should know what it is best at doing. For some, it is customer service. For others, it is having the lowest price, or the top-of-the-line product. Some companies tout their quality and durability, while others offer something no one else can. Whatever your business can hang its hat on, do so – and shout it from the rooftops! Differentiation is the key in today’s commoditized, price-driven marketplace, and every business needs to leverage it to the fullest.

PHASE 4: Build Your Messaging Framework

A. Corporate Positioning Statement

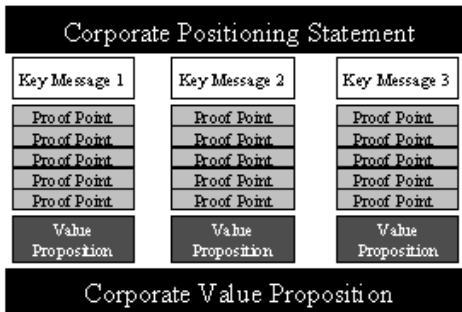
B. Key Message 1:

- Proof point:
- Proof point:
- Proof point:

Value proposition

C. Key Message 2:

- Proof point:
- Proof point:
- Proof point:



Value proposition

D. Key Message 3:

- Proof point:
 - Proof point:
 - Proof point:
- Value proposition

E. Corporate Value Proposition

PHASE 5: Integrate Your New Messages into Your Business Development Engine

Once you have your completed key messaging framework, you have the sales and marketing messages you need to develop all of your marketing collateral, sales materials, website copy and more. Following is a list of some of the areas where you can utilize your messaging:

- Advertising
- Annual reports
- Audio conferences
- Brochures
- Business cards
- Call scripts
- E-mail blasts
- Events – booth messaging, signage, invitations, etc.
- Flyers

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- Giveaway items
- Newsletters
- Public relations – press releases, articles, press interviews, white papers, promotional conferences: audio and web-based; company profiles in magazines and on industry web sites, etc.
- Sales presentations
- Sell sheets
- Speaking presentations
- Web conferences
- Website pages

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Chapter 5: Examples of Key Messages from (Anonymous) Well Known Brands

Below are some examples of well-known companies and some of the key messages they utilize to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. You will note that their value propositions have not been included. The reason for this is that they could not be found. For such prominent businesses, this absence is alarming. Do not let it happen to you and your business!

NOTE: Names and many key statistics have been altered intentionally.

XYZ Hamburgers

XYZ is a leading global foodservice retailer with more than 10,000 local restaurants serving nearly 10 million people in more than 19 countries each day.

- Great message with substantial proof points but it tells us nothing about what that all means for the consumer.

Gas Corporation

Gas Corporation is one of the world's leading energy companies. With approximately 20,000 employees, Gas Corporation conducts business in approximately 80 countries around the world, producing and transporting crude oil and natural gas, and refining, marketing and distributing fuels and other energy products.

- Message does not express customer value.

ABC Technology Integration

ABC provides a broad portfolio of business and technology solutions to help its clients worldwide improve their business performance. Our core portfolio comprises information-technology, applications and business process services, as well as information-technology transformation services.

- Great message but falls short of telling us how it improves business performance.

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Below are some key messages *and their accompanying value statements* from some other businesses that do an effective job of communicating both.

AAA Discount Retailer

We team up with world-class designers in home, fashion, accessories, beauty, furniture and outdoor living and create exclusive products to decorate and delight. And since it's at AAA Discount Retailer, you know you'll always find it at a reasonable—or even surprising—price that lets you add high-quality design to your life, in every room, every day.

XYZ Biotech

Today, as a Fortune 500 company serving millions of patients, XYZ Biotech continues to be an entrepreneurial, science-driven enterprise dedicated to helping people fight serious illness.

ABC Stock Exchange

The ABC Stock Exchange is among the world's largest and most liquid cash equities exchange. The ABC Stock Exchange provides a reliable, orderly, liquid and efficient marketplace where investors buy and sell listed companies' common stock and other securities.

Water Craft USA

For well over fifteen years, Watercraft USA has stood at the forefront of an industry. The list of firsts continues to build, and all our accomplishments have had one simple goal – to give our customers, young and old, unbelievable fun on the water by delving deep into your emotions and escaping the everyday pressures of life.

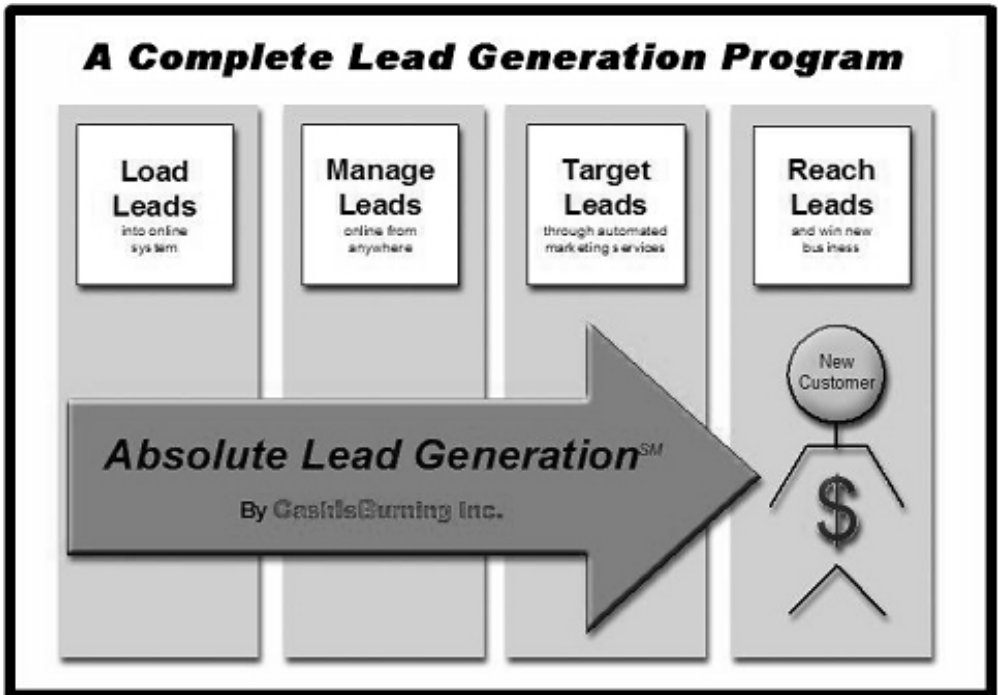
Big Airlines

After 15 years of service, Big Airlines continues to offer the best value in airline travel, allowing Customers the opportunity to travel nonstop throughout the country at a very low fare. Big Airlines offers a very comfortable ride with all premium leather seats and plenty of legroom. Big Airlines does not charge customers an extra fee for changing their reservation and continues to offer free amenities. Customers enjoy complimentary pillows, blankets, snacks, juice, soda, and water on all flights.

Chapter 6: The Effectiveness of a Customer Value ModelSM

A visual representation of your solution and its value to your customer can be very impactful. What I call a Client Benefit ModelSM succinctly and graphically explains your value proposition to your customer in a way that is visually demonstrable and memorable. Below are a few examples of some Client Benefit Models I have developed for clients.

Sample 1



This online marketing services company specializes in helping insurance agents cultivate business opportunities. In its four-step “Absolute Lead Generation” model, the company helps agents capture, manage, target and reach business prospects, in an efficient, easy, straightforward manner.

Concept and graphical treatment by Winning Message LLC.

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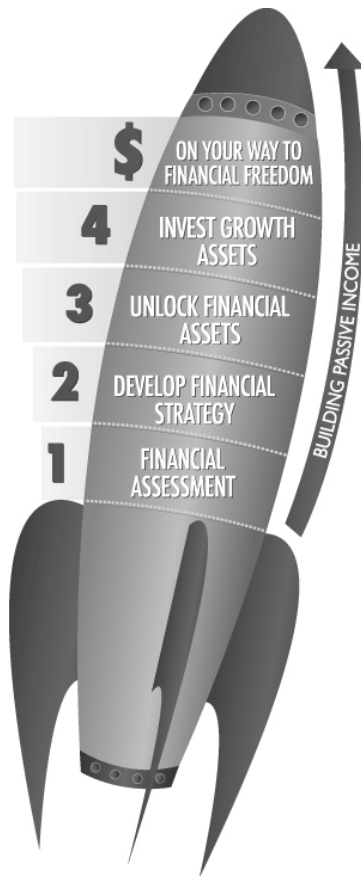
Sample 2



This industry-leading drug development services company helps companies achieve the major milestones required in bringing a new drug to market. Along the development continuum, the company provides integrated services to help streamline this process for its clients while minimizing risks to patients.

Concept by Winning Message LLC. and graphical treatment by Quakenbush Design.

Sample 3



This financial services firm specializes in helping clients unlock stagnant financial assets, e.g. equity in a home, and develop and execute a financial strategy designed to continually build passive income. This approach is intended to help the individual ultimately achieve financial freedom.

Concept by Winning Message LLC. and graphical treatment by Studio Nothing.

Chapter 7: Where do you go from Here?

Obviously, this book only gives you limited insight into branding and key messaging, but it should enlighten you to the fact that your business must differentiate itself in order to succeed.

If your sales presentations, website copy, marketing collateral and other materials cannot effectively stand on their own, it will not matter how talented your sales people are. They will not get the desired number of chances to use their sales skills.

The sales process is quite similar to the job interviewing process. In both instances, the first

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few seconds are critical. In a job interview, the first three steps you take into the hiring manager's office can define the success or failure of your interview. Similarly, in a sales scenario, the first few key messages your business communicates to a prospect can be the difference between a potential sale and no opportunity at all.

We have all surfed the Internet and arrived at a company's website and been immediately turned off by its look and feel, the first few words we read and so on. The same experience happens at tradeshow booths and in business lobbies.

You would not walk into an interview without attire and persona to impress, would you? Your business needs to make the same kind of first impression.

If you have not already done so, you need immediately to return to your office or contact your Marketing department and analyze your business's key messages and those of your main competitors. Objectively speaking, if you aren't seeing how your business stands above the rest, your customers and prospects certainly won't either.

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With the right time, experience and skill set you can conduct this type of analysis on your own and subsequently act upon your findings. However, this work is so critical to a business's success that it must be done thoroughly and effectively.

Many Public Relations agencies offer branding and message development services, but be wary of their proficiency, as it strays somewhat from their core business. For the best results, consult the expertise of a seasoned branding professional with a history of helping businesses successfully build their brands and drive differentiation in the marketplace.

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