

marketer

Are You Looking Through the Wrong End of the Telescope?

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

This article is about how you can communicate in a far more persuasive way. Let's start with the best advice for professional services marketing, something that's been in every issue of *Marketer* and certainly in the air for the last year. That advice is—okay, everyone at once: Find out what your client needs. Act on that.

We are all convinced that we *do* focus on the client. And yet... To make my point, first I ask you to take any three proposal cover letters, memos, or e-mails currently on your desk. Now look at the first sentence. It's a safe bet that "I" or "we" starts that sentence, and that the same first-person pronouns pepper the paragraph and page.

What was that about listening to the client's needs? Oh, dear. But it's not that you are self-centered; you're just selling too hard, speaking too early and too eagerly.

Here, for instance, are examples of marketing communications; in this case, about sustainable design services. Recently, to convince a client that their language did not sufficiently differentiate them from anyone else with the same service offering, we looked at the words that they and several of their key competitors use on their various Web sites to describe what they do. We lined up these sentences anonymously on one piece of paper and asked them to identify their words as well as the other guys'. Here's some of what we showed them:

- "We know how to implement sustainable design in many ways, and we have the resources and experience to do it..."
- "We approach green issues holistically and conceptually, building on our legacy of energy-conserving, environmentally-conscious design."
- "We must lead our industry away from practices that borrow against the future..."
- "In all our work, we strive to maximize the use of solar energy, natural ventilation, and daylighting..."

None of the principals in our client's firm (including the marketing director) identified their own statement, and no one attributed the competitors' correctly, either. The real point of that game was not to prove that it's hard to write effective marketing copy, but rather to show that even experienced marketing people forget to focus on the clients' needs and the world in which those clients navigate. Thus they write about themselves.

One solution: The first word in any outbound communication—the word that will surely catch the reader's eye and appreciation—needs to be "you" (or some close approximation).

Here's another solution: Shift the focus from yourself to those who will make it possible for you to achieve what you want. Identify those people and provide to them what they need, in order to make this happen for you. The visual that accompanies this article depicts the concept: You are at the narrow point of radiating circles. If you want to do something for you, that's pretty easy: You go do it.

"Consider the effect on others of what you want, make sure that the effect benefits them as much as you, and then communicate your desire and ideas."

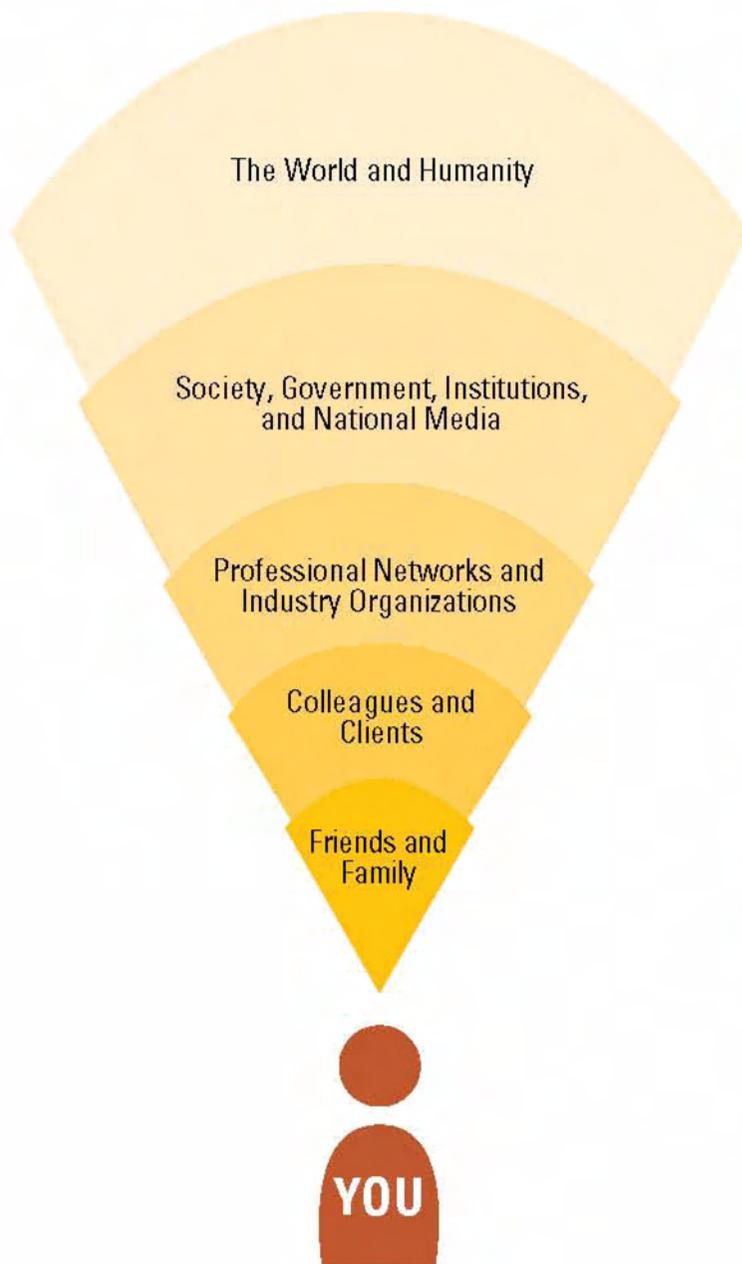
The next ring includes people who are close to you, your personal and family relationships. They don't need much convincing when you ask them to do something for you. But it becomes more challenging to convince the subsequent ring, which includes the various communities where you are involved, to do what you ask. This is where you find your business colleagues, individual clients, and the formal or informal groups that define your daily life—for instance, professional, educational, religious, cultural, and ethnic organizations. If you want something to happen for you vis-à-vis any of the groups, you must recognize and address what those constituencies need. If you give, you may get.

As the rings extend outward, you advance to organized groups—say, your industry, higher education, professional associations, and so on. It's a broader category and that much harder to influence. What can you offer and communicate to them? Why should they care about you? As you proceed to the next ring, you'll find "society": government, institutions, the national media. Access to this group requires you to convey an appropriate big picture and how to achieve it. Only a history of achieving in the other rings and high-level performance will gain you traction here.

Lastly, you reach the world or humanity ring. Few people become influential at this level, but we admire or despise them broadly.

There are a few points to be made from this radiating visual.

- First, if you want to make something happen for you and your firm, you can't just concentrate on what *you* want. You need to focus on what the next ring, perhaps *rings*, needs and expects of you.



- Second, you need to tap into what's important to *the people who populate each ring*. For instance, to refer back to the marketing boilerplate example: If you want to make the planet sustainable, whom do you want to convince, and why? It's not just an individual client or prospect who needs to be convinced to change. It could be users/consumers, legislators and government agencies, colleagues in the design community, and/or lending sources. In short, it's not about how effective your firm is at creating a sustainable building; it's about how effective you are at getting people to want to reach the level of sustainability you want for them—and then enlisting them in your strategy.

Note, however, that your own ability to spur change diminishes as the rings fan out. If you want to gain access to—and have an impact on—the more remote groups (organizations, society), you will need to enlist many others between you and there to believe in your vision. That will bolster your position.

One architect, very frustrated that he wasn't getting the respect and results that he felt he deserved, said to me recently, "I want my clients to do what I want them to do." I responded: "Well, what do *they* want?" Yet what the clients were paying him to achieve for them wasn't his issue; it didn't matter. He was looking through the wrong end of the telescope.

The April 2009 *Fortune Small Business* quotes Paul Kephart of the green-roof landscape architecture firm Rana Creek. Kephart said: "You never tell a developer, 'Together we'll save the world.' You tell him, 'We'll build a highly resource-efficient building, save you money...and together we can save the world.'" Kephart gives his client what the client wants—so he can get what he wants. He stands at the right end of the rings and reaches all the way to the furthest level.

Consider the effect on others of what you want to do, make sure that the effect benefits them as much as you, and then communicate your desire and ideas to the pertinent "rings." If the people targeted are convinced that what you have in mind will indeed benefit them, your path will be clear. [m](#)

About the Author



Contributing Editor Joan Capelin, FSMPS, Hon. AIA—strategist, public relations consultant, popular speaker, and SMPS Fellow—is the founder of Capelin Communications (www.capelin.com), which specializes in professional services firms in the design and building industry. Joan is a recipient of the SMPS Marketing Achievement Award and can be reached at JCapelin@capelin.com.