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Please DO Take It Personally

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What's different about communications these days? A: An obsessive one-on-one attitude that makes it essential for marketers to pay attention not just to the entire client world in which their firm operates but particularly to *each* client, *each* prospect, *each* actual and prospective employee. You get the point.

The Roman god Janus had it easy: His two faces looked only in two opposing directions. You, instead, have to focus in every direction, distant and up close at the same time.

To help you sharpen your skill, here's a provocative game that I play around the country with SMPS audiences as well as in meetings with our clients' entire staff. First, some background—in this case about the Saturn line of cars. Early on, so the story goes, Saturn determined that, to be different from every other car manufacturer, it would make its customers feel comfortable and well-served. Before the first car came off the assembly line, Saturn had met with all of its people: the factory workers, financial people, sales staff, service department, designers, and technicians.



2009 Saturn Sky Red Line

PHOTO: @GM Corp

Together, they made a list of “defining moments” in the customer-relationship cycle. Their list reached 40 most important such contacts—from their prospect’s seeing the ad for the first time, to coming to the showroom, returning to have the car serviced, and trading in the car for a new one.

Here’s your challenge: Take out two sheets of paper. On one of them, note as many of the *hundreds* of times your firm comes into contact directly and indirectly with your clients and potential clients as you can. I promise that you will be surprised. This exercise isn’t just about marketing: Take into consideration also project activities, meetings, billing, business, and so forth.

Let me provide some freebies: direct mail, e-mail signature, office lobby, proposals and contracts, how the phone is answered (and by whom/what).

When you’ve finished, take a look at our list (see page 38). The champions of this game were the animated, attuned members of SMPS Arizona; in March 2007 they contributed the most examples of any audience.

Now, look at your list. Is each moment memorable? Positive? Reputation-reinforcing (and for what)? Does it strengthen your larger and individual relationships?

This assessment will get you ready for the second blank sheet of paper. On it, write down the three adjectives you use most to describe your firm. Then, apply these to the first sheet’s list of “defining moments.”

Most firms use their tag word to describe their approach to their work. Here, we're going to see how completely that phrase or adjective pertains to the firm's culture.

"Is what you say about your firm in your marketing materials and presentations truly what you are all about?"

For example, since *innovative* is the marketing word of the moment, let's try it against the few client contacts offered above. Using that one word, you might ask: How *innovative* is our approach to direct mail? How *innovative* is our office lobby? Our proposals? Our phone-answering? (Those who heard Howard Wolff, FSMPS, at Build Business 2008 learned that WATG's front desk people call themselves "concierges." This is how a first-rate hospitality-design firm has approached this essential greeting task innovatively.)

To test out a few other popular ways firms speak of themselves: If you say that your designs are "influential," how does that work, all the way through? Is the firm equally an influence in the conduct of its related professional societies, as teachers, or as advocates of change? What if you claim to be "service-oriented" ... "accessible" ... believing staunchly in "design excellence"? In short, how well does your suite of adjectives apply to everything about your firm?

Asked another way: Is what you say about your firm in your marketing materials and presentations truly what you are all about? Do your contacts and your marketing match up?

Playing this two-part game will help to define the kind of experience and lasting impression your firm creates. It's even better when you play "Saturn" with your entire firm, switchboard to chairman of the board. And best yet, when you initiate the changes that will immediately become very obvious to all of you.

Not a bad result from an hour together to consider how the firm aligns with its various audiences! It also will be easy for you to see why Saturn's tag line is "Like always ... like never before." Saturn builds cars, and through its integrated messages, it also builds brand equity and client loyalty. ■

"Defining Moments," Potential Answers to Challenge from Page 30

- Ads
- Apparel (with company logo)
- Articles
- Business cards
- Celebrations
- Collection process (fees)
- Community involvement
- Company vehicles
- Contracts
- Correspondence
- Dedications (building)
- Direct mailings
- Documents/drawings
- Dress code (what employees wear, grooming)
- E-mail (content, signatures)
- Entertaining
- Equipment (logos, condition)
- Events (associations/civic/community/charity)
- Field office appearance
- Holiday cards
- Interviews (clients, new staff)
- Invoices/billing process
- Marketing materials
- Minutes
- Offices (design, environment)
- Phone answering (day and night)
- Presentations (portfolio, concepts)
- Press coverage
- Project site (signage, site conditions)
- Proposals and SOQs
- Reports
- Safety program
- Speeches and lectures
- Thank-you notes
- Tradeshow booths
- Web site
- Welcome at front door

About the Author



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