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Framing Your Sales Message—Part II

In last month's Link & Learn we discussed how we all create psychological "frames" which color how we see and interpret what we experience in life. Because no two lives are the same, every person's frame is unique to them. Individual frames are very durable and resistant to change, we are very reluctant to abandon our worldview and accept an idea that doesn't align with it. Frames allow us to deal with an ever-changing environment by applying the lessons learned in the past to the current situation. Stereotypes are a common form of framing; prospects base their interaction with you on their previous experiences with sales people. Prospects are reluctant to adopt any idea which does not fit within their personal frame. To be successful, sales people must learn how to position their products in a way that is acceptable to them. This means that salespeople must ask good questions, which encourage the prospect to reveal how they view the world. Once we understand their motivations and their worldview, we can tailor our presentations to show the customer how our products mesh with how they see the world.

You're selling to Captain Kirk, not Mr. Spock

Many times in my career, I would talk to a salesperson after a big presentation and I would hear, *"I laid it all out. I showed them the research; I gave them the numbers to prove how much money they could save. All the facts were on my side, but they still wouldn't buy the program!"* What these frustrated sales people missed was that buyers, like all humans, are primarily motivated by emotions rather than logic. For centuries, economic theory was based on the behavior of "rational actors." Rational actors make decisions based on verifiable facts and always opt for the course of action which offers them the most lucrative return on their investment. Like Star Trek's Mr. Spock, the rational actor makes decisions based purely on logic. In the last few decades, brain science has found that we are much more like the mercurial James T. Kirk, whose decisions were driven by emotions and intuition. Our frames are built on emotion. A good example of this can be seen in how many people are afraid to fly versus afraid to drive. If we looked at the facts, we should want to charter a plane to go to the corner drugstore—there is a 1 in 11 million chance of being in an airline crash while there is a 1 in 5,000 chance of being in a car crash. While this fear is irrational, it is very real. After watching airline crashes on TV where they are portrayed as major disasters with flames and multiple casualties, we build a psychological frame that says air travel is dangerous. Because we have experienced many uneventful trips by car, we frame auto travel as safe and mundane. Feel free to share these facts with a fearful flyer—I can virtually guarantee you that you will not change their attitude toward the friendly skies. If you are trying to sell airline tickets it is unlikely that you can change people's fear of flying. The best you can do is to tell them your airline, *"has the best safety record in the industry,"* working within their frame and positioning your carrier as giving their passengers the best chance of survival.

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Push the envelope; don't tear it apart

Legendary designer Raymond Loewy was the author of the M.A.Y.A. principle. M.A.Y.A is an acronym for "*Most Advanced Yet Acceptable*." Loewy understood that no matter how much better a product performed than the one it was intended to replace, the public would not accept it if it were completely different than what they were used to. This is why I am typing this on a laptop with a keyboard designed to keep the keys on a mechanical typewriter from jamming. Since we "frame" our decisions on what has happened in the past, a product that is completely new makes us uncomfortable and fearful. To sell something we need to take "*the same thing—only different*" approach.

In 2008 I was asked to take over the leadership of our automotive sales team. This was the height of the recession when the government had to bail out the major car companies. I met with my team to brainstorm a new sales approach. The team told me that their dealers would not advertise in our Pennysaver. They told me while the dealers liked our zoned coverage, that they really hated our "small" flexie magazine format. We worked with the art department to design a four-page broadsheet insert for a local Chevy/Honda dealership. We produced a spec of the "*John Smith Chevrolet Gazette*" to present to the dealer. This piece looked very much like the daily newspaper ads the customer had run for years. Using the "*same thing only different*" approach we explained that his customers would quickly recognize the ad, and he could still run separate pages for GM and Honda cars "just like always." We knew that the client, like most auto dealers, had a powerful ego and liked to be in control of things. We used this understanding of his personal frame to close the deal by putting his name and photo on the "*masthead*" and letting him use our zones to choose his coverage. Once we closed this sale we showed this piece to the other dealers in our area and many of them adopted the program. By presenting the "*same thing only different*," we turned the worst year in US automotive history into the best year ever (\$1 million+) for my auto team.

You'd be paranoid too, if everyone was out to get you

Two Israeli psychologists, Tversky and Kahneman, were in the forefront of researching how the human brain operates. The cornerstone of their work is "*Prospect theory*." Prospect theory is concerned with how people view their "*prospects*" for the future. Their research found that the fear of loss far outweighs the hope of gain in the human psyche. This has a big impact on how we frame issues. One of the main purposes of psychological frames is to protect us from making bad decisions. Frames are inherently "*paranoid*," they perceive staying the course and not trying new products as safer than changing course and sailing into unfamiliar waters. This is why many prospect's default setting is, "*keep it the same*" even when you are presenting them with a clearly better option. The danger of this can be seen in typical attitudes toward advertising. Research conducted by the Dun and Bradstreet Corporation and the Small Business Administration has found that the #1 cause of business failures is

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a lack of customers. In spite of this factual evidence, most business owners fear increasing their advertising budget more than the fear of not promoting their enterprise.

The key to overcoming the bias toward changing their advertising approach is to minimize the risk of advertising and to maximize the risk of not doing so. For example, if a prospect is happy with their current advertising program, getting them to drop it to go into your product will be difficult—they are unlikely to drop a “sure thing” to go with your product. It may be more productive to frame what you want them to do as an “*extension*” of their current program than as a change.

“I’m glad to hear you’re getting great results from the daily paper. If the daily could expand their circulation to reach another 3,000 people, how much do you think that would improve your bottom line?”

“If they could do that, we’d probably pick up an extra two hundred a week or so.”

“Well Mr. Customer if you’re really interested in reaching those people, we could run your same ad in our paper and reach those people for far less than \$200 a week.”

Note that the phrase “same ad” engages the M.A.Y.A. concept.

You can engage the prospect’s natural fear of loss by framing the decision to not advertise as a risk. This is best accomplished with a question.

“Can you put a figure on the business you lose when potential customers are lured away by your competitor’s advertising?”

Or

“You say the big box stores are taking your customers away...how do you plan to counter their advertising in this market?”

Choose your words carefully

Military commanders know that the general who chooses the battlefield usually wins the battle. (*The Union Army didn’t find themselves on the biggest hill near Gettysburg because they liked the view!*) In sales, the battlefield is the words we use and the subjects we discuss. We want to migrate the discussion to areas where our products have a strong competitive advantage. Prospects are inclined to discuss **price**, it is to our advantage to change the subject to the value offered by our papers. For instance, if a client says, “I can get an ad in the XYZ for a lot less money than what you’re quoting me!” Don’t respond by trying to tear down the competitor, let the client do that. Ask them, “*That’s true, why do you think that is?*” This changes the discussion to a comparison of the merits of both products. A good follow up question is, “*Do you have competitors that undercut your prices? Do they offer the same quality and service that you do?*” This causes the customer to do an apples-to-apples comparison and to see your point from inside his or her own frame.

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In the last decade our industry has lost a lot of business to online advertising media. Online sales reps talk about page views and the low cost of each impression. If we try to fight online ads on their terms we almost always lose. Rather than trying to fight them on the “*exposure*” battlefield where they have the upper hand, we should talk about “*customer engagement*” and “*results.*” There is a great deal of research that shows that people have “*banner blindness*” and take little notice of online ads, while they are far more engaged with print advertising. Customers may not be moved by these statistics, so talk to them about their own online experiences. Ask them, “*What was the last online ad you were exposed to and what was it promoting?*” Most people are online daily, but have trouble naming any ads. Follow this up with advertiser testimonials or success stories from your products. Since it’s hard to compete with free, we will always lose out to Facebook if we try to compete on price. Again, a good question is the best tool to stimulate the customer’s thinking. Asking them, “*I’m a big Facebook user myself and it can be an important part of your marketing mix. I’m sure you want to expand your customer base, what are you doing to accomplish that and increase your followers on Facebook?*” This accomplishes several things. First it validates the customer’s own beliefs, by saying they made a good decision, you are working within their frame. This statement also positions social media as “*part*” of their mix rather than a complete program. Finally, it gets the customer thinking about the key weakness of social media with its limited appeal to people not already familiar to some extent with the prospect’s business.

Make every word count

Selling print advertising today is harder than it has ever been. It is a challenge just getting in front of a prospect for even a few minutes. When we do get an appointment, we have to convince them that we deliver more value than many other companies fighting for their advertising dollars. We need to use every tool and trick at our disposal to achieve our goals and serve our communities. Working to understand framing and “*getting inside the customer’s head*” is a powerful way to close more sales and grow our papers.

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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