

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

March 2008

The Mistake of Message Mimicry

An interesting thing happened when Barack Obama shocked the political world with his decisive win in the Iowa Democratic caucuses with a message of "change." Presidential candidates from both political parties claimed the message as their own. Hillary Clinton said she had been creating change for 35 years, John Edwards called himself an agent of change, Mitt Romney said he spent a lifetime making change and Mike Huckabee claimed to be the Republican's agent of change.

The presidential race has evolved considerably since the Iowa caucuses, but this lemming-like response to a successful message raises an interesting question about positioning and the value of differentiation. Why is it that when standing apart is often the key to political and marketing success, so many competitors use the same language?

Buzzword Bingo

Using *The Mission Statement Book* as reference, a writer for *Marketing Magazine* tallied the most frequently used words from the mission statements of 301 of America's top companies. The results suggest that many of these enterprises believe their mission is exactly that of the others, since many of the statements appear to be interchangeable.

The root cause of this sameness is the use of common language: *service* is mentioned in 230 of the statements, *quality* 194 times, *value* is in 183 statements, *leader* occurs in 104 and *best* is in 102.

Certainly, these features and benefits are important, but alone they serve only as banal expressions with little, if any, context. The end result is generic statements that read something like: "company x is a leader in its industry delivering the best service and quality to ensure superior value for its customers." Sound familiar?

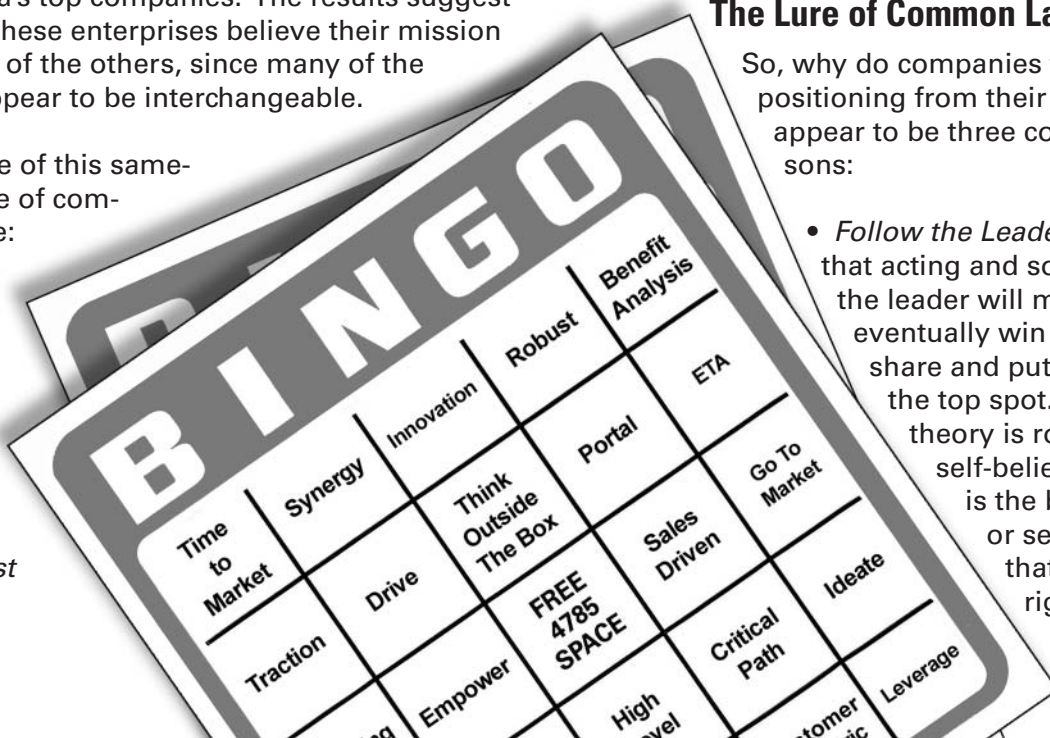
The marketers at IBM apparently sense a message mimicry epidemic is occurring as well. Their current ad campaign pokes fun at the clichés businesses use to discuss their approach to innovation. One television spot features a meeting attendee shouting "bingo" as a corporate leader walks through a PowerPoint presentation using buzzwords to explain the company's approach to innovation.

The point of the "Stop Talking, Start Doing" ad campaign is to get companies to enlist IBM information services, but the fact that every business person watching is in on the joke about "buzzword bingo" says a lot about the prevalence of trite corporate messages.

The Lure of Common Language

So, why do companies tend to copy positioning from their peers? There appear to be three common reasons:

- *Follow the Leader:* The thought that acting and sounding like the leader will make them eventually win over market share and put them in the top spot. Often this theory is rooted in the self-belief that theirs is the better product or service and that they should rightfully own



the leadership positioning. Unfortunately, this approach is more likely to increase the opponent's brand recognition, reduce the challenger's credibility and leave customers with no compelling reason to change.

- *Fear of Omission:* The fear that without capturing every possible compelling reason for a person to choose their company, service or product, they'll miss opportunities to connect with someone. In reality this everything-including-the-kitchen-sink approach serves only to dilute the message to the point it does not motivate anyone.
- *Path of Least Resistance:* Just as the American pioneers pushed west using the trails cut by the explorers before them, communicators look at what is working in their market and follow suit, particularly when venturing into new territory. While it can be time saving, it doesn't make them stand out in the marketplace.

Find a Point of Attack

Great messaging begins by discovering what unfulfilled needs exist that can be credibly addressed. In the case of Obama, he's communicating that he is a fresh face in Washington who is not tainted by the partisan rancor that defined the past two administrations.

Being a central player in the political taffy pull, Clinton couldn't claim change in the same way Obama could. Her strength – Washington experience – was, to some voters, her weakness. The Obama camp followed "Offensive Marketing Principle No. 2" in the book *Marketing Warfare* by Al Ries and Jack Trout: "Find a weakness in the leaders' strength and attack at that point."

Try Harder

The classic example of this strategy in action is the Avis rental car, "We Try Harder" campaign. Launched in 1963, the campaign used Hertz's market domination to its advantage by suggesting that Avis tried harder to please its customers because it had too. It's difficult to imagine many companies admitting to the world that they are number two in a market, but there's no disputing the success of the strategy.


Prior to the campaign, Avis was an unprofitable company with 11 percent of the U.S. rental car market. Within a year of launching the campaign, Avis was profitable. Within four years, it had tripled its market share. Forty-five years later, Avis continues to use the "We Try Harder" tagline and is neck-and-neck with Hertz in U.S. airport car rentals market share.

What Can You Do for Me?

In both of these cases, the message is more about what the customer or voter will get than about what the person or company is. Obama supporters believe they will get a leader with few partisan scars and Avis renters get people who will work harder to please them. These are clearly defined positions that differentiate both and resonate with enough people to keep them competitive, if not put them in the lead.

So, business communicators need to take the time to weigh their company's positioning against the competition. If it is too similar for stakeholders to clearly understand the differentiated offer, they should change, stop talking, start doing and try harder to come up with something better.

After all, imitation may very well be the greatest form of

flattery, but effective business communication is about driving home a differentiated, compelling message, not flattering the competition. 

Get Insight by E-mail

If you would like to receive this newsletter via an HTML e-mail instead of standard postal service, please send your name and e-mail address to us at gsinsight@gibbs-soell.com.

Thank you.

G&S Contact Information

Cos Mallozzi

President and CEO

+1 212 697 2600

cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

New York

Luke Lambert +1 212 697 2600

llambert@gibbs-soell.com

Chicago

Jeff Altheide +1 847 519 9150

jaltheide@gibbs-soell.com

Raleigh

Bob Bowman +1 919 870 5718

bbowman@gibbs-soell.com

Zurich

Jill Allemang +41 (0) 44 205 5565

jallemang@gibbs-soell.com

China

James Huang +8610 6530 7781

james_huang@inhere.com.cn

Tokyo

Linnea Duvall +81 3 5561 2915

duvalll@cosmopr.co.jp

Latin America

Mayra Hernandez +1 954 730 7730

mayra@bitnergoodman.com



GIBBS & SOELL

Your business
is our *passion*.

www.gibbs-soell.com