



Standing out in the age of choice

BY BRENT ROBERTSON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an age of choice, the old story often fails to do the job of holding on to and generating new clients for engineering enterprises. In a world where your biggest and smallest competitors are only a click away, it pays to survey your organization, find out what you stand for, and make sure that you tell a story that is engaging and different.

To stand out in a marketplace that is in constant flux requires a different way of thinking about how we present our organizations. Traditional corporate “stories” are not cutting it in the marketplace anymore.

For instance, companies typically talk about the services they provide and projects they have completed. But this type of story is no longer effective. The company’s story needs to be grounded in why it does what it does. Companies need to declare why their work is important, and to stand out as the obvious choice they need to tailor those messages to decision-makers.

Let’s explore what has changed in the marketplace and offer a formula for how organizations can begin to present their story in a clear, relevant and differentiated way.

The paralysis of choice

In the age of choice, clients have more options to choose from various engineering enterprises than ever before. The rise of digital communications has given microcompanies the ability to scale their services (and their perceived size) through virtual teams. Consolidation in the industry has created giant national engineering organizations that feed their demand for growth by diving deeper into smaller ponds, places where the midsized companies traditionally have flourished.

Now, clients are being pursued by more competitors than ever before. And if a company is not in front of it, what was once the organization’s unique selling proposition or story no longer stands out.

To compete in this environment, an engineering company’s marketers also have more platforms through which to tell their stories. Ever-increasing options such as marketing automation and lead generation platforms, social media and video, along with the plethora of more traditional methods, can paralyze an organization that is trying to figure out which marketing platforms to invest in. Even if organizations are able to make good choices and utilize these platforms to tell their story, there’s the question of performance. Is it generating the kind of

business relationships it is seeking? Is it generating any at all?

What it all boils down to is noise. How are potential clients to choose the right company when they are hearing virtually identical stories from more organizations on more marketing platforms than ever before?

Think of it like trying to find something on satellite radio that really connects with you. You scan the stations one after another in rapid sequence, skipping over the typical commercial fare until you find something unique, something different. Something about that station broke through the noise, even though it was just another station that reached you using the same platform as other stations. That station stood out because it wasn’t interested in broadcasting to the masses. It was only interested in broadcasting to you and others like you. It had a story to tell and presented it loudly and clearly.

In the engineering space, most organizations’ stories sound similar to all the others. In the past, that was OK because most organizations represented the regional pick, or they might have been experts in a particular field. But in the age of choice, no matter how many marketing platforms a company may use to tell its story, if the story isn’t clear, relevant and differentiated, it is just adding to the noise.

The scenario above is akin to a client blindly searching for an engineering organization among the plethora available. But in the real world, most clients already have personal connections, experiences and relationships with an organization. And clients who hire engineering organizations tend to be a conservative bunch, so for better or worse, they often go with the devil they know over the one they don’t. If an organization’s story isn’t valuable enough to break through an existing relationship, the only chance a company has is to cut its fees to win. This, of course, has the unfortunate side effect of lost margins and setting up a low-cost-commodity relationship with a new client.

The costs of not having a story that

is clear, relevant and differentiated are extravagant. If you are not willing to pay the price, this modest investment can make all the difference.

What’s your story?

Most organizations’ stories are based on two distinct components: What they know and what they have done. The average engineering company’s website or brochure is just a listing of service areas and a library of projects they have been involved with. Both of these elements are important. After all, a client certainly needs to know your organization’s technical capabilities and see evidence that demonstrates your capacity.

However, this tends to be the only story that many engineering organizations tell, leaving only a few options for how to make it relevant:

- Constantly redesigning the website or collateral
- Continually increasing the diversity of services
- Endlessly cataloging every possible project in elaborate detail

The trouble with these options is that they become untenable. How many services can an organization possibly have without spreading itself too thin? How many projects need to be displayed and documented to stand out from the competition? How many redesigns can a company afford in order to “look different” year after year? And even if a company could continue down this track year after year, would it attract the kinds of client relationships the company is ideally suited to serve?

What is typically missing from the average company’s story is what the organization stands for, the very thing that can make the story clear, relevant and differentiated. Organizations that rise above the noise in our hearts and minds stand for something. Nike believes that if you have a body, you are an athlete. Apple believes in disrupting the status quo. Starbucks believes in rewarding everyday moments.

And the slogans are not just words.

In the engineering space, most organizations’ stories sound similar to all the others.

MARKET DOMINATION

Figure 1. Telling the world what your organization stands for starts with an internal inquiry.



Everything these companies do, everything they sell, is all on behalf of those beliefs. If we can buy a computer from anyone, why is it that so many of us buy them from Apple, or pay a higher price for Starbucks coffee, or motivate ourselves with posters from Nike? Because they stand for something, and that belief transcends and makes more valuable every product and service they provide.

Often, organizations have three major reasons for not declaring what they stand for:

1. The organization is unaware it would be valuable to stand for something.
2. The organization doesn't know how to go about discovering what it stands for.
3. The organization is unwilling to commit to and defend what it stands for.

If you feel your organization could benefit from a clear, relevant and differentiated story, let's explore how to go about revealing what your enterprise stands for.

You can't find, buy or steal it

The biggest mistake organizations make when seeking what they stand for is thinking that it needs to be created or that it is something to be found and applied to their company.

But "it" already exists, and it simply needs to be revealed, codified and developed. The key to finding and being

able to declare what an organization stands for is conducting an internal inquiry. The inquiry is unique because it looks at aspects of the organization not normally examined. As Figure 1 illustrates, organizations need to understand:

1. What is it about the world the organization wants to change?
2. If you could change the world, what ideally would it be like?
3. What is it the organization is willing to contribute to create the world it seeks?
4. What are the values and beliefs the enterprise demonstrates and holds true?

Because one never knows where the best ideas will come from, it is important to gather feedback from a diverse cross-section of the organization. As the input is reviewed, a set of core ideas will begin to emerge. It is important at this stage not to eliminate any of them. Simply get them written in statements that are as clear as possible, such as:

- ACME Inc. seeks to create a world where human beings live in balance with the planet.
- ACME Inc. will approach every project as an opportunity to improve our relationship with the planet.
- ACME Inc. will do this by respecting our clients, respecting the planet and

delivering environmentally sound engineered solutions.

There is a pattern to these statements that allows for clarity. The first one talks about the world you seek to create. The second one talks about what you are going to do to create that world. And the third talks about how you will conduct yourself along the way. Create as many statements in this format for however many big ideas come from the input.

Will anyone care?

Now that clear statements have been established, any of them could serve as the foundation for a powerful story. But how do we know which one the marketplace will care about?

As the input is reviewed, a set of core ideas will begin to emerge.

To determine this, consider the primary needs of the marketplace. As in the step before, it is essential to seek a diverse set of inputs, not only from people who are part of the organization but from existing clients, partners and industry trending information. Once the primary concerns of the marketplace are agreed upon, contrast them with the statements generated in the first step.

The first part of the statement, "the world you seek to create," should be of vital importance to the organization, not necessarily to the marketplace. The second and third parts, however, should connect to the needs of the marketplace and the organization. Are the actions

that the company is committed to taking important to the marketplace? Is the organization's stated conduct something the marketplace values? Ideally, what the marketplace wants and needs lines up with what your engineering enterprise is committed to delivering and what it values. Tweak the statement to account for market relevancy.

At this point, organizations should be able to create a clear and relevant statement. To make sure it is differentiated, test it against the competitive landscape. It is vital to understand the story your competitors are telling by reviewing their marketing materials and listening to how they describe themselves. It is important not only to evaluate competitors in the space the enterprise occupies today, but also the space the enterprise wants to occupy in the future.

Again, the first part of the organization's statement should be most meaningful to the company itself. The second and third parts should be differ-

entiated enough from the competition to allow the organization to stand out. If at any point the statement you start with doesn't hold up to the scrutiny of relevance and differentiation, start over. Sometimes combining ideas from different statements to create a new one is necessary.

Once you have arrived at a statement that is clear, relevant and differentiated, it must pass one more critical test. For this new story to be effective, it can't exist as words on a page, it needs to be lived up to by the organization itself, demonstrated by what it does, how it behaves and the outcomes of its work. Because the statement was generated through input from the entire organization, it is something that already exists as part of the organization. So before this new story can be put into play, the organization has to be willing to commit to it.

It isn't an easy journey, but it's worth it. If successful, the benefits of having a clear, relevant and differentiated story are many and include:

- You will be able to attract the kinds of business relationships your organization is ideally suited to serve.
- Your work will be seen as more valuable than your competition's, and clients will be willing to pay more for it.
- Your story will reach beyond the company's current footprint.
- You have an aligned and enrolled team of employees who will fight for and defend what the organization stands for.
- You have a powerful story that can make productive use of myriad marketing platforms.

The organization has to be willing to commit to it.

The cost of not having a story that is clear, relevant and differentiated can be exorbitant. Organizations that are willing to invest the necessary time and resources to examine what they stand for, declare it and demonstrate their proficiency to the marketplace can give themselves an extraordinary competitive edge and position themselves for success. ❖

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Industrial Management published monthly at 3577 Parkway Lane, Suite 200, Norcross, GA 30092 for November 2013. Number of issues published annually: 6. Annual subscription price \$120. The general business offices of the publisher are located at the Institute of Industrial Engineers, 3577 Parkway Lane, Suite 200, Norcross, GA 30092.

The names and addresses of the Publisher, Editorial Director, and Managing Editor are: Publisher, Don Greene, Editorial Director, Monica Elliott, Managing Editor, Michael Hughes, Institute of Industrial Engineers, 3577 Parkway Lane, Suite 200, Norcross, GA 30092.

Periodical class postage paid at Lebanon Junction, Ky., and additional mailing office. Printed in the USA. As a non-profit organization authorized to mail at special rates (Section 132.122, Postal Manual) the purpose, functions, and non-profit status of the organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes have not changed in the preceding 12 months. Extent and nature of circulation "average" figures denote the number of copies printed each issue during the preceding 12 months. "Actual" figures denote number of copies of single issues published nearest to filing date, the November/December issue. Total number of copies avg: 812; actual 838. Paid circulation: not applicable (i.e. no sales through dealers, street vendors and counter sales.) Mail subscription: avg. 812; actual 838. Free distribution avg. 20; actual 20. Total distribution 838. Copies not distributed avg. 75; actual 75. Total sum of previous two entries: 913.