Communicating Values: Show, don't Tell

by Jason Cohen on May 18, 2009

A common marketing exercise tells us to list all the adjectives we want customers to associate with our company or product. The result often looks like this (real slide, source withheld to protect the guilty):

Required Brand Adjectives
- Fast
- Scalable
- Enterprise
- Robust
- Seamless
- Easy-to-use
- Integrated
- Secure

Already I'm cringing at the size and scope of the list, but the real problem comes when the marketing department plays Mad Libs:

> Sun GlassFish™ Enterprise Server is easy to use, fast, and scalable … easy to download, develop, and deploy … facilitating robust, highly-available, and cost-effective services. *(source)*

The product description above is *prima facie* false. In all your experience with computers and software, have you ever experienced a system that truly embodied every one of those attributes? No trade-offs, no compromise? A-plus-plus on every count?

Of course not. Since I don't know which of these claims are true, now I distrust them all. And you haven't communicated anything tangible. Fail.

The cardinal rule of authenticity and believability is that actions speak louder than words. A corollary is that if you have to tell me something's true, I automatically don't believe you. If you're honest, you don't walk around saying "Hey, did you know I'm honest?"

Your "values" aren't words to be shoe-horned into tag-lines or stapled onto disingenuous mission statements. Values are the reason for your actions, the theme behind your words, and the underlying consistency in how you do business.

Hollywood actors call this "motivation." A character's motivation is the secret reason why she is angry or depressed or indifferent. A common technique is to invent a back-story—construct a detailed account of how the character has gotten to this point in life.

You don't publish the back-story. You don't come out and say "Darth Vader is disillusioned with the notion of a Republic." Explanation ruins everything!

Apple has mastered the art of demonstrating values without words. Apple has values like "design is paramount," "form over function," and even "Apple is cool." But an iPod wouldn't be cool if some corporation claimed it was. Listing features/benefits wouldn't communicate that either.

This does: (Yeah this clip is dated, but remember how amazing it was?)

iPod Ads
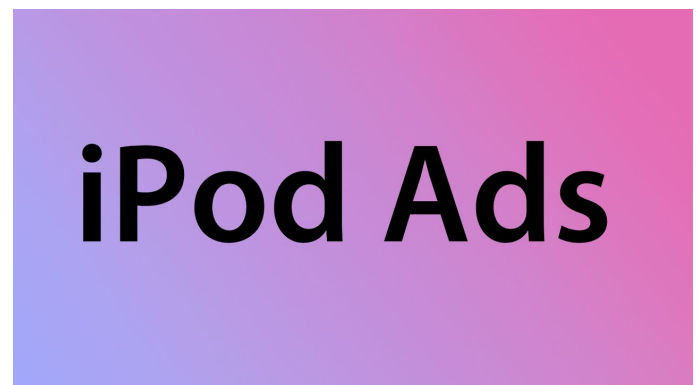
Watch on YouTube

How would "standard" marketing machinery portray these "features and benefits?"

This rule of values—**show, don't tell**—doesn't just apply to commercials. It's in customer service, your website, how you sell, and even how you hire.

Actions count; words don't.

Explaining your values comes off as disingenuous:

- If you have a high-quality product, you don't say "Your satisfaction is important to us," you have a 90-day no-questions-asked return policy.
- If you care about talking to customers, you don't play a recorded message saying their call is important to you, you simply answer the phone.
- If customers love you, you don't say "100 companies use our software," you have a web page with 100 stellar testimonials.

- If you treat your employees as human beings, you don't call them "resources," you mock companies that do that and display testimonials from your own employees.

Once you're walking the walk, *then* you've earned the right to call it out:

- "We're so confident in the quality of our hammer, if ever breaks we'll swap it out with a brand-new replacement. For free!"
- "At MyCo, a human being always answers the phone. Why? Because business is personal."
- "Don't take our word for it, read for yourself what our customers say. Did we pick the best ones? Well yeah, but we have 100 'best ones!'"
- "What if programmers were treated like rock stars? … management, not coding, is the support function. … people love working here." (from Fog Creek)

The "values" here are still words like "quality," "service," "happy customers," and "great place to work," but they're tangible demonstrations, not trite phrases plastered in all the expected places.

Let values motivate action. Values are the means to the end. **Get to the end.**