

It's Not About You, It's About Your Customer

As a judge in several of the categories of the 20th annual Codie Awards, sponsored by the Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA), I completed the daunting task of sifting through many interesting companies, services, and products to find those that should be recognized for this year's awards. As I looked at the brash upstarts and well-established companies competing for this year's recognition, I kept thinking: Wow, so many are worthy of a place. The variety of organizations amazes me.

Established in 1986, the Codie Awards is the longest-running awards program in the software and information industry. The program acknowledges the industry's most innovative products and services through a combination of journalist and peer review. After working on this and other awards programs and "best of" lists for the several years, I can see that the winning companies vary on many dimensions, but they all share a focus on products and services that solve customer problems.

The Egoless Company

Recently I had the pleasure of interviewing Laurel Touby, founder & cyberhostess of mediabistro.com. In a wide ranging discussion about how's she's built her successful company, Touby described her approach in such a succinct way that I repeat her words here: "We focus on what's important for our customers, not what's important for the company," Touby says. "We're an egoless company rather than an egocentric company. The egocentric one puts out what the company thinks is best rather than what the customer wants."

So what can product marketers do to create an egoless company? The process starts with marketers who work extensively with the market to understand their problems. Too often, companies design and market their products in a vacuum, cobbling together a set of features and functionality because they can or because it would be cool. Without input from the target market, an offering is doomed to mediocrity at best.

A critically important aspect of an egoless company is designing a user interface around the way people think. A UI should be intuitive and easy to use. As part of the Codie Award process, I tried out several applications for the first time. Two in particular stood out because of egoless UI design. In each case, I downloaded the application and started to use the product without reading any documentation or instructions. The UI was organized around me and my problems. When I wanted to use a particular functionality, the buttons were where I'd expect them to be and did what I wanted. Product managers at those companies managed to organize their offerings in the way that I think.

The egoless company pays close attention to its marketing and sales approach. A quick look at a company's marketing materials, its Web site, and press releases, can be very telling. Is the focus on the problems customers face? Or do the materials simply describe product offerings from the company's perspective? Here's a simple test offered by MarketingSherpa.com to answer this question for your company: Count the number of times you see the words We, Us, Our, or your company's name on your Web site or a direct mail piece. Then count the number of times you see

You, Your, or the job title of your prospects. Which count wins the contest? If it's the former, MarketingSherpa says you've got a copywriting problem. But I'd go further to say that this is a symptom of the egocentric company.

A similar comparison can be applied to press releases. Are they written about the customer problems solved? Or simply about what the product purports to do? Extend the test to the company's sales professionals and their approach: Are they so busy selling the merits of your offerings that they forget to find out the customer's needs first? The old saying, "you've got two ears and one mouth and they should be used in that proportion," doubles as a sales ego test.

Focus on Your Customer's Problems

Technology marketers can learn a lot by emulating the publishing industry, which knows that their business is all about getting the readers' attention. Like a publisher, work first to understand the audience and then use that insight to decide how to satisfy your prospects' informational needs through effective marketing programs. Your online and offline marketing content is meant to drive action, which requires a focus on describing answers to your customer's most urgent problems. Too often, marketing and communications materials simply describe what an organization or a product does. While this might be valuable to a subset of your visitors, what people really want to see are the issues and problems they face, and then details on how yours is the best solution.

Your marketing is meant to be the beginning of a relationship that makes it easier to sell your products and services. That relationship begins when you work at understanding your target audience and figure out how they should be sliced into distinct buying segments. Once this exercise is complete, identify the situations in which each target audience may find themselves. What are their problems? What keeps them awake at night? What do they want to know about your solution? Now you're ready to communicate your expertise through valuable white papers and case studies.

Every marketing tool is a chance to tell your prospect how your offering provides ideal solutions to their most urgent problems. At each stage of the target-market identification, problem articulation, and solution process, useful, well-organized marketing programs will lead your buyers through the sales cycle. Marketing is developing buyers who are ready to make a purchase or other commitment to your organization.

Apply the "show, don't tell" rule as an effective way to create marketing materials that specifically address customer problems. Where previously you might have listed target-market segments and the customers your organization has in these categories, you could instead create a library of customer stories that demonstrate in real-world scenarios how organizations make use of your product. You could also include photos of the product in action. Marketing materials that show how your organization solves customer problems are vastly more effective than simply listing products, or writing all sorts of copy that tells how your product works.

Winning your company an award

Can you influence winning your company a Codie Award, getting named to "best of" lists, and garnering other prestigious industry recognition? Sure: just become an egoless company. Create a 100% focus on your customers, communicate it effectively throughout the year, and see what happens when the awards are announced.