

Differentiate Your Company or Die

By Rick Hill

In the 90's Wisconsin was trying to keep up with the times and decided they needed a new State Slogan. I guess "Wisconsin; America's Dairyland" was a little too old fashioned. As with most things done by government committees, the final entries were a mishmash of insipid, innocuous and irritating phrases. I can't remember any of them except for one upstart slogan that the committee couldn't kill; "Wisconsin, Eat Cheese or Die." Now, that was a slogan. In the end we spent thousands of dollars deciding that "America's Dairyland" wasn't the best slogan but it was good enough.

"Eat Cheese or Die" may not fit into everybody's idea of a good slogan for a State, but it was and still is memorable. Another great slogan and company name rolled into one is the "Geek Squad". You know what they do and you can't forget their name. Tie the image of the Geeks in their black pants, white shirts and skinny black ties with their matching black and white, squad-car-like Volkswagen Beetles and you have an unforgettable image with the name/slogan. Did you remember they were part of Best Buy?

Robert Stephens, founder of the Geek Squad could have called his computer technicians Best Buy Computer Support, or Best Buy On-call Technical Staff but no one would remember those names. The Geek Squad differentiates the team from every other support group and easily comes to mind when you are having a computer crisis.

Stephens is quoted as saying; "Advertising is the tax you pay for being unremarkable." He knew that creating a great name would be the prime advertising of his company and was focused on making his team remembered.

In our woodworking industry we often forget that we are marketing to consumers. We think if we open a shop the consumers will come. Well, in the economy of three years ago, that may have been true, but now we need to grab every prospect we can.

If we use the Geek Squad as an example, can we differentiate our companies from our local competition with our name? Now I am not advocating changing your name to the very memorable but often maligned "Butte Crack Carpentry". Instead I want to give you new ways to differentiate yourself in a positive light.

How important is this differentiation? You can do a simple test for yourself. Pick up the Yellow pages and go to any category, Dentists, Accountants, Rug Cleaners, it doesn't matter. Pretend you are new in town. After looking at the ads, who will you call to have your teeth (or your rug) cleaned? Why did you pick them?

Now do the same test on your own company. Whether you look up Kitchen Cabinets in the Yellow Pages or Store Fixtures in Google how have you differentiated your company from the list of the many that appear? If you were new in town, would you call you?

The key is to differentiate your company from the competition in the three main categories of promotion, product, and performance. To differentiate your company you need to first have a unique selling proposition. Something in your company name or promotion, product or performance that will grab the prospects' attention and make them call. This unique selling proposition is based on the special strengths of your company.

Your unique strengths can be determined in several ways. Promotional uniqueness is about how you advertise your company over the others in the market. Do you have the best selection of doors, the largest showroom, or the most vignettes? That becomes your unique strength over the other competitors.

When focusing on Products, look to your strengths in manufacturing. Does your company use only solid wood? Are you able to make a completely "Green" product? Is your designer or design team fantastic at ergonomic layouts?

When looking at differentiating your company based on Performance, one way to find the answer is to ask repeat customers why they come back to you. Asking repeat customers is easy, but at times they may not want to tell you the truth. It is not to their advantage to tell you that you underbid everyone else by 25%. And unless you want to make your unique slogan, "We leave a lot of money on the table" it won't help you create new, profitable business. When asking past or repeat customers about your strengths, have a specific list of questions you need answered. Questions like; what did you like most about our work here? Was the job completed to your satisfaction? If you were to refer us on to a friend, what would you say about our company? will get the answers to your strengths.

Performance strengths can also be found by comparing your company and it's offering to the current competitors. Each company often advertises what they believe is their strength. Unfortunately, we all have a tendency to advertise the same things, Custom Cabinets, Free Design Service, Huge Selection, blah, blah, blah. If everyone advertises the same set of offerings then the offerings are standards not strengths.

If you really want to change the way prospects think about your product then the best method is empathy. Empathy is the true key to differentiation. Showing that you understand your customer's pain is the best way to grab their attention away from your competitor. If you can learn what your customer wants, then you can gear your promotion, products or performance to their needs. Learning their needs also helps you define how to market to them.

For example, we all hate the dirt that remodeling creates, but I have yet to see any shop advertise a daily clean up service on their jobs. Some do it but it is rarely promoted. "The cleanest remodel in town" or "Free daily clean up" might be a nice addition to your advertising.

Here is a quick breakdown of ways that you can differentiate your company from the competition.

*Daily clean up service; offer to seal the doors to the adjacent rooms so dust doesn't travel throughout the house. You may already be doing this, but are you promoting it?

*Fast Installation; could you pre-stage the cabinets for quick installs? Can you create a team of skilled plumbers, electricians, and carpenters that will all arrive together and get the job done quickly? Would you be able to install over a weekend, like the Extreme Makeover team?

*Quality of product; Solid wood vs. particleboard, hinges, slides, inside accessories; there are all kinds of ways to promote quality. Unfortunately, many low quality companies use the word quality in their tag lines. To set your company apart from these competitors, make sure to spell out what products you use that make your product better.

*Special finishes or custom stains. The woodworking industry is a fashion industry. 5 years ago we did a lot of white pickled finishes. 2 years ago there was a ton of corbels, carvings and ornate doors. Now we are into Green cabinets and natural woods. Promote the ability to make all these colors and finishes come true. Think ahead of the trend. Are you spraying a finish that could be considered Green? Promote it now.

*Delivery; are you faster than your competitor? Promote it. This is a fast food society and we have a hard time waiting 2 minutes for a meal. 8 weeks for a display or kitchen is an eternity.

*After the sale follow up; offer a one-year free adjustment on all cabinet doors and cabinet door cleaning. It gets you back in the house to ask about other possible jobs.

*Green; going Green is the current fad. Can you capitalize on it better than your competitor, or at least promote it as your specialty?

*Guarantee; Hyundai got a big foothold in the car market with their low price and warranty. Could you offer a better guarantee than anyone else? Long guarantees often make people think you have higher quality than the others in the market.

*Experience; Have you been at this longer than the competition? Are you a long-standing family operation that can tout your history? How about a picture of a 1960's retro kitchen with a slogan like; "My Father made your Mother's dream come true. Can we do the same for you?"

*Design; talk up your design abilities or team. Look at other fashion industries like hair stylists. Ever notice how they boast about the recent schools the stylists have attended? You could do the same. Promote the styles of cabinets you or your team members specialize in. Don't have a specialty? Then create it with discussions about types of work that were recently completed.

*Most offerings; Do you have the largest amount of door styles or hardware on display?
How about cabinet vignettes in your showroom?

*Company Name: Your company name is the first impression the prospect sees. If you are just starting in the industry, please don't name the business after your self. Tommy's Displays might sound nice to Tommy, but it makes no impression on the customer. We bought our cabinets three years ago from "T and P Woodworks." He was the shop our builder wanted to use and so we went with T & P. Nice guy and he did a good job. I met Ted of T & P again a few weeks ago and he talked about how he had seen a recent upswing in business after he changed the name. He found that he had a lot more calls from higher end clientele when he changed his name to "Artisan Woodworks".

When you have finally found your strength, work on focusing it into the Elevator Speech. The elevator speech is a 30 second memorable summary of what you do that can easily be given in a limited time. When you are introduced to someone in an elevator for example. The elevator speech also works well when leaving voice mails for prospects. Make it memorable, so the prospect has a hard time forgetting your company.

After you have your elevator speech down it will be easy to distill it into one sentence. The sentence needs to be something that the prospect can easily relate too and again remember.

My neighbor is a lumber broker and he has his elevator speech and sentence down pat. The speech goes into how he buys lumber from small sawmills and helps them by selling it to the large users throughout the country. He makes the connections that they can't. He talks about his freight rates and team of people that get the best freight rates in the market. When people ask him what he does for a living, he sums it up in one sentence "I buy and sell hundreds of truckloads of lumber." Not only is it simple, memorable, and easy to understand, it is also defining. You know that he is interested in volume and in full truckloads. This is the guy to call when you have a big job.

Differentiating is the key to bring in more work and catching the eye of more prospects. Whether it be in the name, product or performance, make sure that you are focused on the your strengths and on how they relate to the customer base. Promote those strengths in a way that is based on your prospects needs, not your own.