



Creating a marketing communications plan

BUSINESSES SHOULD THINK BEFORE THEY SPEAK

Marketing communications (marcom) activities include creating customer-facing materials such as web sites, blogs, webinars, brochures, press releases, and event activities. Marcom planning's proximity to the customer makes it one of the most important activities a company undertakes. Thoughtfully written marcom plans:

- Keep your company speaking with one voice across a vast number of products, regions, and customer interactions
- Enable diverse teams of people to create integrated communications vehicles
- Help your messages rise above the din of the marketplace and consistently resonate with their target audiences
- Give you better results for your expenditures of time and money

MARCOM PLANNING PROCESS OVERVIEW

First you study

Marcom plans are the confluence of substantial research and shrewd decision making. Effectiveness is built by thoroughly understanding your:

- Target audience profiles: Who are your existing and potential customers? What is the best way to communicate with them?
- Buying, selling, and communications processes: How do your customers prefer to buy? How are you set up to sell? What communications will best facilitate buying and selling?

Then you decide

Armed with a solid understanding of the terrain, a number of decisions emerge:

- Objectives: What do you want to happen as a result of your marketing communications activities? What customer behaviors do you hope to inspire?
- Messages: What do you want customers to know?
- Vehicles: Which communication vehicles will best convey your messages?
- Budget and tactical calendar: How much will these vehicles cost to develop? What is your budget? When should these vehicles be released?

THE SCOPE OF THE PLAN

Marcom plans can be focused at the product level, the product line level, or the company level (i.e. company or brand image)– or any combination of the three.

The higher the focus, the less specificity addressed by each element of the plan. See the following table for more detail:

		Focus of the Marcom Plan		
		Product	Product line	Company image
Elements of the Marcom Plan	Target audience	Specific	Broader	Broadest
	Messages	Detailed	Higher level	Conceptual
	Vehicles	Very targeted	More general	Broad reach

TARGET AUDIENCE PROFILING

Know your customer applies to virtually every marketing activity, and is doubly true for marcom planning. First, learn about your target audience in terms of specific demographics and psychographics, then spend time understanding:

- How they prefer to get information about your type of offerings
- How they use this information during the buying process

Target audience profiling—including psychographics—is a big and important topic. To learn more read the **On The Mark** article titled *Target audience profiling: why TAP is so important*.

BUYING, SELLING, AND COMMUNICATIONS PROCESSES

The primary role of marketing communications is to maximize sales by aligning your selling process with your customer's buying process.

- Your customer's buying process consists of the steps they follow when making a purchase.
- Your selling process consists of the steps your sales teams and/or channel partners go through when making a sale.
- Your communication process creates the customer mindset you are trying to achieve during each stage of the buying and selling processes.

Effective marketing communications begins with a thorough understanding of these important processes. Below is a chart mapping the communication process with typical buying and selling processes:

Communication process stages					
Awareness	Credibility	Interest	Preference	Selection	Loyalty
Lead generation					

Buying process stages						
Identify the need	Identify alternative sources	Evaluate alternative sources	Select a short list of alternatives	Conduct a technical evaluation	Purchase	Renewal

Selling process stages						
Identify opportunity	Qualify opportunity	Plan the solution	Propose the solution	Provide due diligence	Close the sale	Manage the account

To move a customer from identifying a need to making a purchase, your communications must first make them *aware* of your offering, then build *credibility*, and so on. Identifying and understanding the different stages of these processes allows you to more effectively craft marketing messages and select communications vehicles.

Remember, these are *typical* processes. Different customers (i.e. governments vs. businesses vs. consumers) will have different buying processes. And your selling process will vary depending on your business model.

OBJECTIVES

Marketing strategies

Marcom plans should build on your marketing strategy. However, in many companies there is no formal statement of high-level marketing strategy, so the marcom plan will have to cover more ground.

Let's get specific

Create a number of marcom objectives that specify what you want customers to do after experiencing your marketing communications. Should they:

- Visit your website?
- Register for an event?
- Download a white paper?
- Request a call from your salesperson?
- Consider you a top provider in your industry?

It's also important to decide how you will measure success; the more quantifiable the metrics, the better. For example:

- A 10% increase in market share
- Generation of 100 new leads
- Double web page click-throughs
- 200 event registrations from net-new attendees

MESSAGING

Marketing messages are touchstones that focus and unify your marketing vehicles.

Remember, marketing messages:

- About individual products can focus on specific features and benefits.
- About a product line are typically limited to highlighting similarities, differences, and relative positioning among products.
- About your company image typically address overall branding.
- Must be consistent and compatible with each other and your company branding.
- Must reflect the stage of the communications process you are addressing. Creating awareness requires different messages than creating *preference*.

To learn more about creating compelling messaging read **On The Mark's** article titled *The power to lure customers: why is messaging important and best practices*.

VEHICLE SELECTION

Choosing the right communication vehicles depends primarily on which stage of the communication process you wish to influence, and secondarily on the focus of your marcom plan. See the tables below for a few examples:

Communication process stages					
Awareness	Credibility	Interest	Preference	Selection	Loyalty
Industry blogs	Customer stories	Webinars	White papers	Customer references	Newsletters
Advertising	Press and analyst activities	Competitive positioning advertising	[Web-based] product demos	Proposal content	Communities

Focus of the marcom plan		
Product	Product line	Company image
Data Sheets	Brochures	Advertising
Installation guides	Conferences & industry events	Press activities

Vehicles can often address more than one stage in the communication process, but typically have a specific strength within a certain stage.

BUDGET AND SCHEDULE

Once you have identified the appropriate mix of communication vehicles, you should determine the costs of your plan, compare them to your budget, and adjust accordingly.

The final step is to create a *tactical implementation calendar* that outlines when each vehicle will be released and who is responsible for getting it done.

TIPS TO THE WISE

Some final comments about creating an effective marcom plan:

- Ideally, you should create a plan that addresses each step in the communication process. However, limited budgets typically require prioritization.
- It's often best to prioritize your weaker areas. For example, don't bother building awareness in a market in which yours is already the preferred product.
- As a general rule, focus on the first half of the communication process for your newer products, and the second half of the process for your established products.

MORE ABOUT ON THE MARK

On The Mark marketing consultants elevate your team's business impact by accelerating marketing program development and execution. Our hand-selected consortium of consultants is known for:

- **Envisioning possibilities:** Super-smart, competent marketing consultants
- **Raising the bar:** Experienced leaders that continuously deliver innovative yet meaningful business impact
- **Making it happen:** Driven, accountable marketing experts that are focused on results...not our egos

On The Mark's full-time and part-time consultants strategize, plan, and execute a wide range of business-to-business marketing programs. Our conscientious, can-do approach combined with our extensive marketing expertise make us smart and fast on our feet. Clients rave about our results and how easy and hassle-free it is to do business with us. If you'd like to learn more, please contact us at Connect@OTMmarketing.com.