Leading the debate

The role of issues-based research in professional services marketing

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Introduction

Few professional services firms have made much of the opportunity to take a substantive lead on understanding, commenting on and having a real impact on issues that directly affect their clients.

An issues-based approach to marketing provides firms with the ability to demonstrate a real understanding of a particular industry, its mechanics and its players. Once a firm can show that it has that understanding, then it can act alongside its clients as a full participant in the industry, trusted for its expertise and knowledge. As part of that process, the firm is then able to lead change and respond to external threats in the industry rather than being a purely reactive, dependent adviser.

Commissioning and publishing research into issues faced by clients is **the** most effective marketing technique available to professional services firms. It is one of the most tangible ways for a firm to demonstrate that it is aware of and understands the issues facing its clients. It also provides an excuse to talk to potential clients about their industry, markets and problems.

The research can also be used in a number of other ways including forming the basis of a strong and very focused media relations and political communications campaign aimed at raising awareness of the issue and providing the firm with a leadership platform.

In this report, we set out the benefits of using issues-based research, and provide practical advice on setting up an issues-based research project from selection of the appropriate research topic through to publication of the results.

Key components of successful marketing

Successfully marketing the services of a professional services firm relies on forging and building relationships with those decision-makers who have a requirement for the services offered by your organisation. Relationship marketing – as this practice is known – requires an in-depth understanding of the decision-maker's business and the factors which drive their requirement for advice.

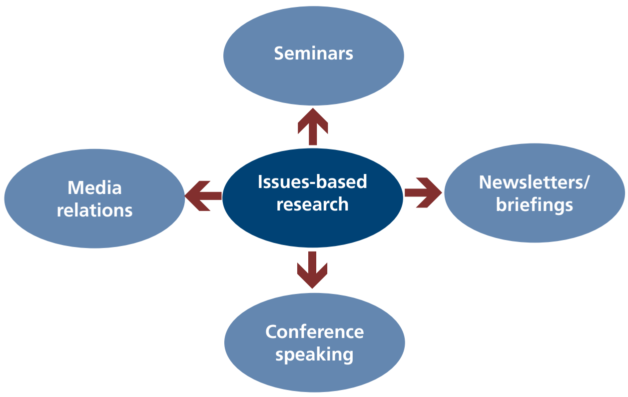
The most effective marketing techniques are, therefore, those which are best at demonstrating the firm's understanding of the issues facing potential clients as well as the firm's capabilities for helping clients to address these. Also, the techniques must be cost effective, both in terms of not only the actual cash cost, but also the amount of a fee-earner's time that they take up.

Since decision-makers will rarely appoint advisers until they have met them, engineering opportunities to meet with decision-makers to 'sell' them your firm's proposition is crucial. Recent research that we have conducted in the legal sector has shown that 98% of all marketing approaches by law firms fail to generate any new business. This is because law firms do not focus on using their marketing to engineer opportunities to set up sales meetings with potential clients.

The role of issues-based research

Issues-based research is the best marketing technique for meeting all of the requirements of successful marketing as set out above. Specifically, it:

- provides unique insights into issues facing clients – insights which will not be available to your competitors
- provides the opportunity to comment on/analyse the impact of these issues on clients' businesses
- allows your firm to lead the debate on these issues, particularly in the media
- provides the content for other marketing activities such as one-to-one briefings, newsletters, seminars, conference speaking and press coverage, as illustrated below



Setting up an issues-based research project

When setting up an issues-based research project, there are a number of key factors to consider, namely:

- choosing the right issue to research
- selecting the most appropriate research method
- selecting the agency that will carry out the research
- the timetable and cost of doing the research
- whether to link up with third parties
- how the findings are going to be used

We now consider each of these in turn.

Choosing the right issue to research

Choosing the right issue is crucial to the success of a piece of issues-based research. It has to be an issue that is currently or will shortly have a major impact on your target audience. It also has to be an issue that your firm can assist clients to deal with; there has to be a 'hook' to sell your firm's services.

Professionals who understand their clients' businesses well should always be able to identify the current 'hot' issues. Failing this, discussions with a few clients should enable the appropriate issues to be identified. For obvious reasons, it is important that the chosen issue has not recently been researched by one of your competitors.

The objective of a piece of issues-based research can vary as follows:

- to benchmark how the target audience is dealing with a current issue
- to assess how the target audience is likely to respond to a development in the future
- to gauge an audience's views on an issue, prior to lobbying for change, say, with Government

Some examples of issues covered in surveys by professional services firms include:

- Employment issues, e.g. level of Trade Union activity or employee concerns over access to information
- Concerns over data protection and privacy
- Protecting IP rights around the world
- IP issues for dot-coms
- Funding issues in the Charity sector
- Impact of the Euro on business
- Business confidence surveys
- Fraud barometer

Selecting the most appropriate research method

There are two main ways of conducting any form of market research: qualitative and quantitative interviewing.

Qualitative research involves in-depth, face-to-face interviews with respondents from the chosen target audience. These interviews are time consuming both to set up and undertake, and as a result they are more expensive to commission. However, they do provide the highest quality of response.

Quantitative interviewing usually involves a greater number of shorter interviews. These can either be telephone interviews or self-completion questionnaires. Questionnaires can either be posted to recipients or completed over the Internet. It is notoriously difficult to get people to complete questionnaires and as a result the response rates tend to be very low. It can also be difficult to get a 'balanced' sample using questionnaires, because respondents are self-selecting.

Most issues-based surveys in the professional services sector therefore utilise telephone interviews. Sometimes a small number of in-depth, face-to-face interviews will be conducted to scope out the topic, prior to designing the questionnaire for use during the main telephone interview phase.

Generally, response rates to surveys are dependent on a number of factors, but a good agency conducting research in the professional services sector should be able to get response rates of between one-in-three and one-in-two.

Selecting the agency that will carry out the research

The most important factor when selecting a research agency is its experience and reputation. Have they done research projects for other professional services firms? Do they understand how to work with partnerships? Have they sufficient experience of conducting interviews with senior executives?

Another factor is the level of their resources, particularly the size of their field force. Have they got sufficient interviewers to handle your project in the time required? Also, if the project is an international one, have they got the resources and experience to handle this?

Check that key agency staff are members of the relevant professional body, the Market Research Society. Accreditation under a quality standard, like ISO 9001 and/or the quality assurance system specific to the market research industry, MRQSA, will also provide a level of additional comfort to you.

Finally, look at how much they will be charging you, and ask the question, "Can I work with these people?".

The timetable

It is important to plan all research projects, and drawing up a realistic timetable is crucial.

Research has a finite shelf-life and it is therefore important to publish the results as close to the date of the fieldwork as possible. If the research is being undertaken to coincide with a change, say, in legislation, it will have maximum impact if the findings are available on or close to the date of the change.

Whatever the timescale, you should develop a timetable which covers the following:

- working up the research idea
- selection and briefing of an agency
- designing the research method and questionnaire
- building the sample database
- fieldwork
- data processing and analysis
- report writing
- publicity

As a general rule, you should allow about 8-10 weeks for such a project.

Linking up with third parties

Sometimes it is worth considering the benefits of linking up with a third party when conducting issues-based research. These can either be leading organisations, like the CBI, IoD, etc, or specialist publications.

There can be many benefits to such a link-up including:

- extra credibility, particularly in a sector where respondents might not be aware of your firm
- higher response rates
- access to the third party's members/readers
- shared costs
- easier to get media coverage in the one publication, although this may significantly reduce coverage elsewhere

If properly managed there should be few drawbacks, although you may have to accept the loss of some control/independence.

Using the findings

The most tangible output from an issues-based research project should be a high quality executive report. This is not the time to cut corners in a project of this nature. Such a report should achieve maximum impact when sent to respondents, clients, contacts and targets. It may even be worth sending to non-respondents.

A shorter, executive summary or 'taster' document might also be useful to prepare if your original report is particularly lengthy. This may be appropriate to produce if you are going to attach a price to the original report, should you decide to make it available for sale.

If you are going to release the findings to the media, this needs careful planning. Consider national, regional, business and trade press, and international press if relevant. Remember to focus your efforts on those publications read by your target audience. Partners like to see/hear themselves on TV and radio, but these media are likely to have limited exposure to your target audience and such publicity is very time consuming to set up.

Take the time to get it right. Rather than just drafting a press release and sending it to all appropriate publications, think about offering exclusives to certain journalists – give them special briefings on the findings, and set up case studies around respondents who are prepared to go on the record. Investment of time and thought in the tactical execution of the media relations can pay substantial dividends in terms of coverage and reputation.

There are additional ways of developing your leadership around an issue beyond the use of research and, when all packaged together, a host of other tactics all applied over time can create a very effective, long-term campaign.

Finally, as part of an integrated marketing campaign, consider hosting seminars and other briefings, secure speaking slots at key conferences, and set up meetings directly with decision-makers to discuss the implications of the research for their businesses.

This is an area where firms need to make significantly greater efforts to boost the sheer sales value of their issues-led research. If it just sits in a pretty report on a shelf then it is wasted. Use the momentum that the findings and their media exploitation can create to get out and talk to clients and contacts alike.

About the report's authors

Kevin Wheeler is Principal of Wheeler Associates, a specialist consultancy providing strategic marketing and business development advice to professional services firms, which he set up in 1997. Previously, he had been Marketing Director with Nabarro Nathanson, the commercial law firm, and Cinven, the private equity house. He has also held various senior marketing positions with Coopers & Lybrand.

Kate Thompson is a Partner with McCallum Layton, a leading, independent market research agency based in Leeds. Kate has been designing, managing and analysing research studies in business-to-business markets for twenty years, and has specialised in the professional services sector for the last twelve.

Chris Hinze is a Partner with Hinze Communications, a public relations consultancy advising clients in the professional services sector. Previously he was the worldwide director of communications for Andersen Legal and also spent five years at law firm Nabarro Nathanson after joining from a background in public relations. In all his roles he has worked with clients on issues management communications and marketing.

Wheeler Associates and McCallum Layton work together to provide market research solutions for professional services firms. Each year they undertake more than 2,000 interviews with users of professional services both in the UK and overseas. Hinze Communications works with them to provide clients with an integrated approach to their exploitation of research findings and surrounding issues.

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