



Give the People What They Want

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Raise your hand if you like blueberry juice. What, never heard of it? Apparently neither had our three-year old son, Jack.

Jack's big sister, Olivia, works him over on a regular basis, getting her way through some combination of manipulation, bribery, stealth, and sometimes even subterfuge. In other words, she's a born marketer (or lawyer, God forbid). So we knew she was really off her game recently, when early one morning she was not getting her way. When she bribed Jack with "blueberry juice" – whatever that is – and was then silenced by his blank stare, it was Jack 1, Olivia 0. The tables had turned. She reached for an incentive that just didn't work.

Aside from the cheap excuse to write about two of my kids, there really is a point here: you have to give people (clients) what they actually want, not what you think they want. And no one is going to want blueberry juice....

Consider the example of Coca-Cola. At the time of the introduction of New Coke in the late 1980s, the flagship cola had been beaten up in the marketplace, partly by Pepsi and partly by its own siblings Diet Coke, Sprite, and the many other sugary soft drink options. Its market share was steadily declining and Pepsi was poised to take over the vaunted position of Number 1. Coca-Cola executives were already aware, based on empirical data from blind taste tests, that people preferred the taste of Pepsi to Coke. It was smoother and a bit sweeter. So in the spirit of giving people what (they thought) they wanted, they introduced New Coke, replacing the old standard. The uproar was swift and severe. The same people who conclusively demonstrated in blind

taste tests that they preferred a sweeter, smoother formulation, refused to buy the sweeter, smoother drink. They had deep, emotional resistance to the change. They had grown up with Coke – and been bombarded for decades with marketing that was specifically crafted to create that deep connection. In a matter of months, "old" Coke was back, rebranded as Coke Classic, and New Coke drifted away into obscurity.

Coca-Cola was in a particularly tough spot. They knew that they had to make changes and that people really did prefer the taste of Pepsi to Coke, but they could not go that extra step and actually ask the customers if they wanted a change. If they had asked the public, word would have gotten out and Pepsi would have jumped all over that, shouting from the rooftops that Coke was considering a drastic change because they were losing market share. So Coke had to make the decision based only on the data, not on the "wants" of its customer base. When that change was ultimately forced upon the customers, their reactions were decidedly negative.

This phenomenon is seen in all types of businesses; people want to feel that they are in control and that their wants and needs are being met. It's often tough to walk the fine line between giving them what they think they want and what you know they need. But as is often the case, it's simply a matter of communication. There's nothing wrong with simply asking your clients what they really want. Good ways to facilitate this communication include asking several leading questions, such as:

- What, specifically, do you want to accomplish?

- What criteria will you use to define whether this has been a success or failure?
- How do you prefer to communicate - email, office phone, cell phone? How often do you want to hear from me as we work on your project?

You might find that many of your clients have never thought about these things. But the exercise is almost always fruitful, because it forces them to consider these issues and improves the chances that they will be happy with the outcome.

In my own business, I have been very surprised to find that one of the most valued parts of my service is one that seems very simple, and frankly, I don't enjoy very much. Many of my clients get bombarded by sales people selling advertisements. These folks are typically good at sales and very assertive, and my clients often don't know how to politely tell them to hit the road. This is particularly true in the case of retail businesses who really need to be careful about how they treat the public. So most of them simply hand these cold-callers my card and tell them to call me, absolving themselves of the decision-making process. Now, I dislike dealing with the sales people as much as anyone else, but I can serve as a go-between, shielding my clients from them. It's a job that anyone can do and requires very little of my marketing expertise, but the value it brings to the clients is enormous. It frees them from wasting their time and energy. I never would have realized on my own that this part of the service would be of such value – I'm much more focused on the strategic marketing aspects – but my clients have spoken and I've had to listen. So the take-home message is this: Ask your clients

what they want - the answer may really surprise you.

Update

In the last issue, I put some pressure on myself to complete the major upgrades to our website. If any of you have gone there, you've seen that it's not done yet. With any luck, it will be done by the time you receive this issue. That is, of course, unless those darn sales people keep bugging me....

Duane Carey is President of IMPACT Marketing & Public Relations in Columbia, Maryland. He was a consulting hydrogeologist for 11 years prior to launching a marketing consulting firm in 2003. He earned his MBA at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), and is a Certified Professional Geologist (#10305) and past President of the Capitol Section of AIPG. In late 2005, he took over the helm of IMPACT, which was founded in 1990 by one of his professors at JHU. He can be reached at 410-312-0081 or duane@MilkYourMarketing.com

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