

DON'T SOLVE THE PROBLEM – DO A BROCHURE

On Being Original In A Brochure

By Bruce W. Marcus

There is a peculiar comfort in a brochure. It's easy to feel that if you've got one, you've taken care of marketing. Or most of it, at least.

Brochures, then, are too often done "...because everybody has one," rather than as part of a thoughtful marketing plan.

A brochure, in this context, is a pamphlet or booklet that describes a firm, a facility or a service. It may be used to explain all or a segment of the firm's services, or how the firm functions in a particular industry, or addresses a specific problem.

Despite the values inherent in well-done brochures, there are some pervasive misconceptions that substantially undermine their very real value to sound marketing. Perhaps the most expensive misconception is that brochures *sell* -- that a prospective client will read a brochure loaded with glowing adjectives, and sign a contract as a result of it.

To assume, too, that people read brochures thoroughly and carefully is another trap. In fact, a brochure, no matter how attractive or thorough, is usually simply glanced at. It may be read in conjunction with other material, to get an overall impression of a firm. But it's rarely devoured like a novel.

There's a tendency to forget that publications strongly compete against one another -- and against other marketing literature -- for a prospective client's attention. Your brochure is rarely the lone voice in a wilderness. Nor can a brochure be merely self-serving, ignoring the needs of the reader. The brochure that sings the praises of oneself may fulfill egos, but rarely will it fill coffers.

For all that a good brochure can contribute to a marketing program, it's rarely the keystone of a total marketing effort, nor should it be. But as an *adjunct* to a marketing plan, it can be powerful.

The Power of the Well-Designed Brochure

In conjunction with other marketing tools, brochures . . .

- Are tangible, with staying power. They give dimension and weight to anything you say about your firm and capabilities.
- Can demonstrate a firm's most valuable asset -- its intellectual capital.
- Catalog and describe a firm's capabilities, facilities, expertise, or

point of view, all in best light.

- Can supply valuable information, redounding to the benefit of the source.
- Give visual dimension to a firm. A well-designed, attractive publication implies a well-run, efficient organization.
- Give legitimacy to a new facility or service. A new practice in an existing firm, for example, becomes tangible to both its prospective clientele and the firm itself when it appears in print.

When is a Brochure not Indicated?

A brochure is distinctly contraindicated when...

- It's not part of a plan that delineates why it's being done, and how it's going to be used.
- There is no clear view of how it will demonstrate the firm's intellectual capital.
- There are better ways to accomplish the objectives set for the brochure.
- It can't be done with a professional and businesslike appearance.

The Web Site

It's now difficult to think of a brochure without thinking in terms of a web site. The two are different, of course, although the inevitable question is that if you've got a web site to carry your information, why do you need a brochure? Several very good reasons...

- People have to come to a web site to see it. You put your brochure in the hands of the people you intend to see it. Serendipity is great, but you can't build a practice on it.
- A brochure is static. It stays what it is until you rewrite, redesign, and reprint it. Very expensive. A web site can be changed every ten minutes, if you like.
- You can't see a web site without a computer. You can read a brochure on the subway.
- The content is different. The web site is more dynamic, constantly changing (or at least, it should be), and constantly updated. Its strength is in its immediacy. A brochure's strength is in its constant, focused message.

And don't think that you can simply put your brochure on your web site. Nobody will look at our site a second time.

The Basic Questions

Within the context of even the simplest marketing program, thinking about brochures should begin with the very basic questions...

- Who is our audience, and what do we want them to know, think, or feel after they've read my publication?
- What are we trying to accomplish with this publication in terms of the overall marketing program?
- How will the brochure be used in conjunction with other marketing tools?
- Will some other marketing tool better accomplish what we want the brochure to do?
- How will the publication be delivered?
- Understand *positioning* -- What is the one most important thing about your service that meets the most significant need of your prospective clientele? That *position* should be at the crux of your brochure – the guiding and impelling factor that drives the thrust of your brochure. (A classic example of how a position works was the sign in the war room during President Clinton's first election campaign – It's the economy stupid. It told the campaign staff that the economy was the primary concern of the electorate, and that every message, speech, or piece of literature must have that position as the driver.)

The answers to these questions will, in turn, focus the objectives of the brochure, and lead to developing a more effective document.

The format is dictated not by arbitrary choice, but by the role the brochure is to play in the marketing plan. Too often, the graphic designer is called in before the writer, and before the brochure's marketing role is defined. This subordinates the message to the design, almost invariably resulting in a visually attractive publication that diminishes or fails to serve the communications or marketing objective. In fact, be sure that the designer understands that the message is in the text, not the design. Let the text do its work.

Still, publications should be professionally designed, written and produced. Amateurism will say things about your firm that are unflattering and counterproductive. If appearance is not the primary factor, desktop publishing may be sufficient. But a brochure to rest on the desks of CEOs of prospective clients should not be home produced.

The art of writing a brochure is exactly that -- an art. But in writing brochures for a law or accounting firm there are some distinct considerations that can make the difference between a brochure that accomplishes your objectives and one that doesn't.

The thoughtful, and most useful, brochure for a professional firm must solve a major problem -- how do we describe our facilities and services in ways that differentiate us from our competitors, and at the same project quality? Ethics, of course, preclude comparison, which forecloses a classic marketing device.

One problem -- one nagging problem -- remains. How do you get the message across without using the same language that everybody else uses, and saying the same things that everybody else says? How do you distinguish one professional firm from another, when you can't use adjectives? No problem is more vexing than this.

That's the dilemma. With a product, you can make a distinction. You can make a claim, and maybe even prove that claim. "Our bulbs are brighter and last longer than their bulbs." Presumably, you can also say, "We do better audits," or "We do better briefs," but you can't prove it, and who'd believe it?

What Works?

The answer is always emerging, driven by the imagination of marketing professionals, but we do begin to see some things that work:

- Clarify the objectives. Again. Clarify the objectives.
- Think *positioning* -- the guiding and impelling factor that drives the thrust of your brochure.
- Keep it simple. Don't try to say too much in one brochure. Make one point about your firm and make it well, and you're ahead of the game. Nobody, remember, reads a brochure like a novel, cover to cover. Let major points stand out for the skimmers. Go for the overall impression, and don't try to tell everything in one brochure.
- Focus. Limit the brochure to a single purpose. A service. A facility. A single problem and its solution. Omnibus brochures seem to be less effective than the single-purpose document. And always with the position in mind.
- Always have a plan to use the brochure effectively, before you start to write it. Know beforehand who your audience is to be. You have different things to say to different audiences. How you write anything is a function of who you're talking to, and no one statement is universal. Know how the brochure is to be distributed, publicized, used in both direct mail and personal selling situations. A brochure to be sent ahead has a very different point of view than one to be left behind following a meeting, as a summary or

reminder, and to reinforce points made in person.

- Write about your solution or services as if you invented them, even if you know you didn't. It may be the first time your reader has seen that capability or solution delineated.
- The operative word, implied or in fact, is "you." Most brochures die when the first word is "we." Your brochure must be cast, invariably, in terms of the needs of the market -- what the prospective client needs, not what you have to sell.
- Don't tell the reader what he or she should think about your firm -- demonstrate it. Don't say "We become involved with our clients' business," find a way to demonstrate it. Don't say "We pride ourselves on service," find a way to demonstrate it.
- Don't expect the brochure to present an *image* -- if by *image* you mean a perception of your firm that's other than reality. If you don't like the way your firm is perceived by the market, don't try to change the perception by manipulating symbols -- it won't work. Rethink the business you're in, change the firm accordingly, and then write the brochure -- not the other way around.
- Don't cast your brochure in stone. The life of a firm brochure shouldn't be more than two years. If your marketing program works, and your firm grows, it will outgrow the brochure in less than two years. If the brochure is applicable to the firm and still current after two years, then your firm is in trouble. Even if you don't want to be larger in two years than you are today, there's going to be some kind of change and growth. If it doesn't happen, you're in serious trouble as a professional and as a business.
- The best way to describe who you are isn't by describing it -- why should anybody believe you? It's to demonstrate what you do, and how you do it differently. Use case histories. You don't have to use the client's name. You can always say, "A manufacturing company had an inventory problem arising from the vast number of small parts used in its product. Smith & Dale solved the problem by..." As the song goes, "Don't speak of love -- show me." The trick is to talk about what you've done, not what you *say* you can do. "I can leap a wall a thousand feet high" is nothing compared to "Here's a picture of the high wall I leapt and here's a picture of me leaping it."
- Borrow from corporate annual reports. In the attempt to get the reader's attention, corporate annual reports use a number of exciting devices and techniques. A round table of financial analysts discussing the company. The CEO interviewed. An illustrated first

person narrative. Boxes and sidebars to depart from the narrative to discuss an important point, or to define an unusual concept.

- Deliberately try to be different. If everybody else plays a major scale, play a minor scale. If you said it this way last time, say it that way next time. Do you want to be read? Work at it. Clichés don't work. If you can't do more than clichés, save your money. Don't do a brochure.
- Purpose alters the format and text of a publication.
- Think carefully about illustration. All professionals seated at desks look alike. Use both your own people and client situations imaginatively. Appropriate graphs and charts can help.
- Be thoughtful about details. For example, how a brochure is to be distributed affects its physical design. If it's to be mass mailed, postage costs are a major consideration. Odd shapes that use custom designed envelopes increase costs substantially. Consider, too, how long the publication will be expected to do its job. A brochure with an intended long life shouldn't have dated references.
- Work with professionals. Sure it looks easy. You know what you want to say about your firm. You know how big you want the pictures to be. But as effortless as the better brochures look, that's how hard it was to get them to look effortless. Conceptualizing a brochure that really says to your clients and prospects what you want to say to them is an art form, rooted in skill and experience. Designing a brochure is a skill that's as professional as yours, and the difference between a brochure that's a chore to get through (and so won't be read) and one that's as inviting as a chocolate cake is artfulness. Use a professional.

The artfulness in a brochure is derived from knowing beforehand what you want people to know, think, or feel after they've read it. The art in a brochure is getting people to really read it in the first place, and to accept what they've read as news, as gospel, as a point of instruction and interest.

A brochure, in a sense, is no different from any marketing tool. Properly used, it works. Improperly used, it not only doesn't help, but it lulls you into thinking that you're accomplishing more than you really are. Better to take the larger view; to develop the larger marketing context in which the brochure is a working cog.

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