

How to effectively market yourself

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Information professionals usually don't consider marketing themselves as a big issue. After all, we are the key to all the information, we are service and customer-oriented, we know our business – so customers will just come to us, right?

Wrong. We do need to market ourselves. It's important to let our customers know who we are and what we can do to help them. Read on – how to market yourself as an information professional.

Customer-focused service

There are three questions that are vital to marketing yourself (or anything else).

1. Who are you?
2. What do you do?
3. Why does it matter?

The first question is the easiest one, but numbers two and three are harder to answer. 'What do you do?' should address the unique selling points of your services, in terms of results to the customer. If you are a literature searcher, yes, that is what you do, but expressed from the customer perspective, what you do is 'Provide a good overview of published and grey literature on a certain topic, focused on their particular problem'.

This then ties in to the third question, which is the most compelling to the customer: why does it matter to them what you do? This last answer should directly link your services to the benefit that the client is after.

Describe your services *from the viewpoint of the customer* and link them to a direct and recognisable benefit for him or her. It must be clear how your services make a valuable contribution to that benefit – that is what will get customers' attention. If you provide a literature search service, the customer benefit is a good overview of existing literature (which translates into information to help them solve a problem or make a decision) and avoiding re-inventing the wheel (which equals time and money saved).

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Promote your services portfolio

Once you have defined your services, make sure this information is ready to hand when your customers need it. Nowadays it is essential to put your services portfolio online, but do not forget to create print versions. Hand them out when you meet customers, it gives them something to read immediately. Just providing a link requires another action from them, which will reduce the chances of them ever seeing your portfolio.

For example, when I worked as an information specialist in a large, multinational company, a lot of my clients were not in the same building, the same continent or time zone. To raise my profile, I set up a short, informative web page about my services within the library group on the company intranet. This made it very easy for my current and potential customers to find my list of services and see samples of my work.

Every week I devoted time to browsing and reading internal discussion forums, and participating in discussion by providing references, pointing to online and offline sources or offering to set up a literature search for them. Every time, at the bottom of my reply, there was a pointer to my services page on the website.

Find champions

A champion is a person who knows your qualities and services, is trusted by your target audience, and is willing to carry your 'story' to others. The champion does not have to be a customer, but does connect you to potential new customers. A trustworthy champion is very positive introduction. She or he should have a wide network within the organisation and be recognised as a leading figure. A champion can advise you on the best way to find new customers, can increase your understanding of the organisation and generally promote your services.

To find a champion, look for senior managers or people with key roles in the organisation. When I worked for a consultancy firm as an information specialist, one of the senior managers was my champion. After I had performed several last-minute heroics for him, finding obscure information, he introduced me to his whole team, saying I had saved the day several times and was a human search engine. He urged others to use my services instead of looking for information themselves. I would catch up with him frequently, getting inside information on the information needs of the consultancy group and, through him, was introduced to new potential customers.

Stay in touch

Make it a habit to stay in touch with your colleagues, your customers, your potential customers and your champions. As a service professional, spending time with colleagues or customers is an investment in your future; you will learn more about them and be more likely to come to mind when services are required. If you contact them casually, people very often will be reminded of something they wanted to ask you: a research request, a question about that new database system or advice on finding information about competitors.

If your customers or champions are very busy and it is hard for you to simply 'drop by', meet them over a cup of coffee or during lunch. We all have to eat, don't we? During those short meetings, get to know what's keeping them busy and find ways you could help them. Build a network of people, so you have feelers out in your organisation to keep you up to date and in the loop. You will be amazed how much more work will be referred to you and how much easier it gets to build business cases.

This article is a condensed version of a chapter from the author's book *Characteristics of the Successful 21st Century Information Professional*, Chandos 2006, ISBN 1-84334-145-X. For more information, see the author's website at <http://www.dennie.heyne.nl>.