



By John Fries

To borrow a phrase from 1970s commercial character Raymond J. Johnson Jr., you doesn't has to call it a brand. You can call it a unique selling proposition, a value proposition or what you do differently from your competitors.

A value proposition, simply stated, is what causes customers to buy from you rather than from your competitors. It's something you offer that they can't get elsewhere. It could be anything that's meaningful to them: quality, price point, unique experience, level of service, prestige, or other characteristic.

For example, in the luxury goods arena, some companies command premium prices because their target markets want to buy things that have status attached. These customers want to be seen driving a Porsche, Audi or Tesla, carrying bags by Coach and Kate Spade, or writing with a Montblanc pen. People in the socially conscious demographic shop at Whole Foods and drive a Prius or other environmentally friendly car. Economy-minded shoppers seek out deals that offer them discounts or membership points.

Each of these businesses has a value proposition based on something unique. They've all invested financially in making sure their customers know beyond the shadow of a doubt that their expectations will be met time and time again, and will be satisfactory.

What's cool about a value proposition is that it quickly identifies your company as the go-to in your industry, which leads to sales and profitability. And who doesn't want that?

So how do you determine what your value proposition is? Determine what your customers want, and what's meaningful to them. Or create something that no one else is doing and leverage its uniqueness.

From the page to the stage

One of my clients is a professional theater company that owns a unique niche in its marketplace. It only produces plays based on works of classic and contemporary literature. Other theater companies occasionally do this, but my client does it 100 percent of the time. Parents and their children alike could enjoy (and learn from) the company's offerings. There was a problem, though: the value proposition wasn't strongly communicated. So, we had to develop a strategic plan and materials that communicated the value proposition to win new audience members. It took time, but the company is now being recognized for its work in offering something unique in the theater landscape.

Here's how I help companies determine their value proposition, then communicate it. It's a multi-step process that requires patience, but it's worth doing for long-term success.

1. **Have a candid conversation within your company.** Ask "Who are we, what do we stand for, what makes us different, and why should customers care?" This is a difficult step because it not only forces you to be honest with your assessment, but it also compels you to think about—or even create—a marketable point of differentiation to which your customers and prospects are likely to respond.
2. **Determine how your company is currently perceived.** Gathering scientific data through surveys, etc. is an excellent way to learn this, much better than simply assuming. You might actually be surprised. Then, articulate how you WANT your company to be perceived.
3. **Understand your customers.** Talk to them. Ask them what they want, what they appreciate that you already do and what they wish you did differently. Seriously consider their suggestions and the implications of doing and not doing what they want.
4. **Put it all down on paper.** Create a statement that defines your company's uniqueness and how it translates into a winning value proposition. Define your audience(s) and how your new value proposition will impact their experiences at every customer touchpoint. Then, develop a concise, specific statement that tells people who you are with a minimum of words. For the theater company I mentioned above, I created the tagline "Theater for the mind," playing off the old radio description of "Theater of the mind."
5. **Now, sell it.** With your newly minted value proposition ready to roll out, look through the sales and marketing content you're currently using—printed materials, website, etc.—and figure out where you can infuse existing content with messaging that reflects your value proposition. Develop boilerplate language and message points that support the proposition. Incorporate it into your advertising, PR, online, and other communications.
6. **Consider your visual representations.** It might be that you'll want to modify your logo, company colors and other visual touchpoints to more

effectively communicate your proposition. Maybe you'll include a new tagline. Or develop a new logo. Most non-designers don't realize this, but colors, typefaces and wordmarks communicate nonverbally. If you'd like to know more, Google "color psychology." The reason for modifying the visual elements is that they speak to customers in their own way.

7. **Be patient.** Customer perception and acceptance of a value proposition takes place over a period of time, helped along by customer experiences that reinforce the perception. Keep being consistent in your interactions and messaging. Demonstrate by doing. Good luck!

John Fries is a Pittsburgh-based marketing, PR and branding veteran, writer, author, media producer, and designer who has built and led communications teams at several prominent organizations and worked with dozens of clients to help them communicate with more impact and get results. His website is at www.johnfries.com.

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