

Ducks In A Row?

by Carolyn West-Price Touhey

Think about this for a minute. We all use the word on a daily basis. We write it in business plans. We speak it in staff meetings. And, we use the term to evaluate performance. Yet, the majority of companies, regardless of size, do not use this term to guide their strategy to the extent that they should. And, many use this term interchangeably (although incorrectly) with “vision” and “position.”

According to Webster’s, the definition of “objective” is “goal.” “Vision,” on the other hand, is defined as “mental image.” And, “position” is how you want your company to be perceived in the market.

With that said, it is vital to your success that you spend time clearly stating each and make sure they are complementary. If you don’t, you will be among the many who state their objective as some diluted version of their mission or in ambiguous terms, such as, “We want to grow the business.”

While this is a viable statement, it is not sufficient for strategically guiding a business.

Specifically, for an objective to be effective and truly useful to a business or non-profit, it must meet these criteria:

- 1) it must be quantifiable (revenue, profit, numbers of units, etc.);
- 2) it must be realistic; and
- 3) it must have a time line attached.

For instance, instead of saying, “We want to grow our dive business,” a more effective objective would be, “We want to increase our revenue by 20% by December, 2010.”

You will know if that is realistic.

In looking at these two statements, you likely see that the latter is much clearer and “black and white,” so it can help you guide the company more effectively. And, you will be able to measure if you got there or not so you can refine your marketing and business plans with quantifiable information.

While on the subject of objectives, it is critical to have one corporate or macro objective so you can steer the ship, since your objective should clearly identify where you’re going. In addition to this macro objective, however, I suggest that you may have “sub-objectives” for different products and/or even different marketing tactics—objectives, that if met, will “feed” the main objective.

And, as you can see, sub-objectives allow you to evaluate and refine your marketing plan or operations throughout the year, rather than waiting to the specified “deadline” in the macro objective and then wondering what worked best throughout the year.

For instance, in your marketing plan, you may include special events as some of your promotions tactics. One of those events may be an underwater treasure hunt for charity, knowing it will get you some cool publicity and it’s something fun to promote to your customers.

To ensure you can measure the effectiveness of this tactic as a “contributor” to achieving the macro objective, state a tactic-specific objective, too. For instance, “We want 40 people to attend our treasure hunt in April.” This objective meets the criteria --quantifiable, has a deadline, and you assume it’s realistic.

Now do that for your other tactics, whether it’s an ad campaign, a networking event, or participation in a fundraiser, and be sure to evaluate after each tactic is implemented to determine what worked and how to make improvements, including better tracking.

DRIVING DOWN THE SAME ROAD?

Here’s where the challenge comes in. Too many organizations don’t share their objective with staff. That leaves employees in the dark. And, if the goal is not clear to everyone, how can they best function as a team.

To make matters worse, many owners and managers don’t involve staff in the strategy sessions to plan how to achieve the objective and to brainstorm tactics. Yet, staff members often have a better pulse on the customers than managers do. (Just look at the new show, “Undercover CEO” and you’ll be amazed at what upper management and owners don’t know about their customers.)

Finally, management usually gets so caught up in moving forward from one tactic to another, or one crisis to another, that they miss the opportunity to evaluate tactical objectives, let alone the macro objective, so the opportunity to refine and retrench is lost.

WHERE IS THIS BUSINESS TAKING YOU?

Now that we’ve discussed “objective,” let’s look at “vision,” another term that is often overlooked or misused.

Again, a vision is a mental picture. And, while you can have a vision for your company, it is essential for a business owner to have a personal vision. Specifically, every business owner should recognize that the business is a means to an end for himself or herself.

To explain, an illustration will do it best. In a recent seminar, an entrepreneur said his vision was to have his company in such good shape and profitable within the next five years that he can remove himself from day-to-day operations and just oversee operations via laptop while sitting in a lanai in Bali with his wife. That’s a pretty clear vision.

I can see it. Can you?

Guided and motivated by his vision, he is making sure his ducks are all in a row. He has stated his objective clearly and has his marketing, staffing, and management training in line to meet that objective.

But, his plan, and yours, will not be as effective as it can be without incorporating one other mis-used term, “position.”

Plain and simple, this is the way you want your customers and the market to perceive your company. Once you define this, you are in a position to structure all of your branding and customer service to convey and reinforce this position.

For instance, a furniture store in Maryland used the slogan, “The Cheapest Guy In Town.” He used that slogan on everything—vehicles, signs, ads, phone greetings, uniforms, and even the walls of the stores. The marketing was on newsprint, not slick paper; the stores were big-box before warehouse shopping was in vogue; and the products were, in fact, geared to the first-time homeowners, apartment dwellers, and others for whom budget was more important than name brands.

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The company's position was clear, and everything the store did (marketing and service) were consistent with that position.

Armed with a clearly stated objective, a vision of where you want your company to take you, and a position so there is no market confusion about whom you are and what you do, your marketing and business plans will be much more functional and effective than ones with confused terms and ambiguity...the way most companies operate.

DO IT NOW!

While we're still early into the New Year, now is the perfect time of you to re-visit your objectives. Make sure they are leading you down the path to achieve your vision--personally and professionally. And, make sure you design methods into your schedule to inform and empower your staff so they become more involved in the big picture and can see how vital their roles really are to the success of the organization.

Get your ducks in a row...and you can be in Bali, or wherever your dream takes you, too!

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