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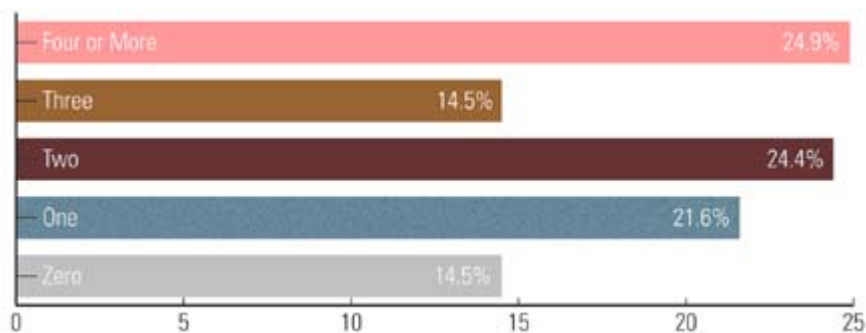
Brand Building

Messages Your Clients Will Hear (and Remember)

By Eric Gregg

Do your clients and potential clients know your company's name? In a recent study by staffing industry research firm iLoyalty, human resource decision makers were asked how many staffing firms they could name from memory. Sixty percent of respondents could remember fewer than three, and 15% couldn't recall the name of a single firm (see [Figure 1](#)). The study, which surveyed more than 500 human resource professionals responsible for staffing decisions, found that the staffing industry suffers from generally low awareness, especially among those who do not currently use a staffing company.

Figure 1: Respondents Were Asked How Many Staffing Firms They Could Recall.



Does this matter to your staffing firm? According to professor Paul Farris, an instructor at the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business, it should. "Awareness is the first step in building a relationship with a prospective client. If closing is the end of the sales journey, brand recognition is the start."

Why Brand Awareness Matters

Low brand awareness levels are an industrywide challenge. No single staffing firm in the study could be named from memory by more than 21% of human resource decision makers. On average, even 20 of the most recognizable names in the staffing industry could still only be named from memory by 5% of the respondents.

Brand awareness is a fundamental building block of brand equity—a measure of the value that a company's name adds to the products and services it offers. It's the reason consumers are willing to pay \$3.40 for a latte at Starbucks when the independent coffee shop across the street is charging \$2.40 for the same latte. Consumers recognize the Starbucks brand and perceive the name to promise a certain level of quality and consistency in the company's products.

A decade ago, you didn't need to know who roasted your coffee. Consumers were perfectly happy to buy it at a gas station for 50 cents a cup and might not have been able to name the top coffee companies in the U.S. It was a commodity industry; price was a dominant criterion in selection, and the company that provided the product didn't matter.

Today, however, the retail coffee industry thrives, and consumers are paying nearly \$5 for a cup of gourmet coffee that was handpicked and specially roasted. The brand of coffee matters a great deal to many coffee drinkers. By building brands and communicating what makes those brands different, the coffee industry fought off commoditization.

The staffing industry faces similar challenges. Your firm can fight through the industry clutter to build brand equity with prospective clients.

Starting From Zero

While low brand awareness is troublesome for the staffing industry as a whole, it represents opportunities for your staffing firm. In the staffing industry, no firm enjoys universal brand recognition. That creates an opportunity for you to build your brand in the markets you serve.

Your prospective clients, like the rest of the U.S. population, are exposed to as many as 5,000 marketing messages a day, according to a study by research company Yankelovich Partners. That is more than one million marketing messages a year. Building brand awareness in this environment is very difficult. The messages you deliver have to provide a quick and memorable message about your brand.

The iLoyalty study identified five key areas that your current and prospective clients are most concerned about. To break through the marketing clutter, your branding must convey five essential messages to those clients.

Five Essential Messages

Value

Message 1: Our staffing firm provides the best value in the staffing industry.

Staffing company owners all believe their firm provides the best value in the staffing industry. But you have to prove that to prospective clients.

The first step in proving you add more value than your competitors is to understand how your prospects define value. They may say that your billable rate is the deciding factor, but the iLoyalty study revealed more complex reasons. Survey participants often listed billable rate and cost as reasons they considered changing firms. When asked to rank staffing company attributes in terms of their overall importance, though, only 15% of participants ranked cost as the most important. In fact, more than 50% of human resource decision makers did not rank cost among the three most important attributes.

If your prospective clients are expressing price concerns, they may actually mean they have value concerns. They may be thinking about billable rate, turnover, fill rate, availability after hours, or any number of other factors—which will all be different for different clients. Find out what your prospective clients are really worried about, and find ways to prove that you

will deliver their definition of value to them better than anyone else can.

Quality Employees

Message 2: We have reliable, high-quality employees available when you need them.

It may seem like an obvious thing to tell prospective clients. Surely every staffing firm will claim to have high-quality employees. To stand out in the crowd, you must back up what you say by showing clients the steps you take to assure quality of the employees you place.

The staffing industry can be a black box for clients. They place an order and magically, if everything goes right, employees show up to cover the shifts they need. Your prospective clients have no idea whether you typically interview one candidate or 35—unless you tell them. They don't know if you conduct background checks, check references, or just send the first warm body you find.

You know the many steps involved with making a placement. Communicate—and take credit for—the efforts involved in ensuring that your clients receive reliable, high-quality employees. Track and report the attributes of quality employees, such as attendance, performance appraisals, turnover, and absenteeism. Let your prospective (and current) clients know what you do for them.

Client Satisfaction

Message 3: You will be treated as a valued client when you use our staffing firm.

You want your clients to value you. You should also show clients that you value them, every single day, through every contact and every business-related message that they receive. This means everyone working at your staffing firm has to take responsibility for client satisfaction.

Keep this in mind when the person at your front desk answers a client's call, when a client sends an e-mail to you and waits for a response, and especially every time you send an employee to a client's work site. At every single point in the messaging chain, you are either building your relationship with your client or you are hurting it. Making effective use of these opportunities is the first step toward sustainable growth for your firm.

In addition, show clients you value them during specific critical instances. How do you respond when a client complains about a bad employee you placed? What do you do when a client calls with a desperate need to fill a last-minute vacancy? It is the times when the relationship is tested that matter most in building long-term loyalty and referrals.

Look for opportunities to exceed clients' expectations and deliver exceptional service. You and your staff should long to hear the words "thank you—you didn't have to do that."

Information

Message 4: You will have staffing information available when you need it.

The iLoyalty survey showed that your clients want more detailed reports than they're currently receiving. They want those reports more quickly. And they want them to summarize information on both current and past staffing employees.

When asked to rank how their primary staffing service providers performed in six specific areas, study participants gave their staffing firms lower marks for information management than for almost any other area. In fact, less than one-third of participants felt they had access to the human resource and staffing information they needed. The study found that accurate and timely reporting was most important to large organizations and to individuals in charge of high-level strategic staffing decisions.

Let your prospective clients know about the advantages of your current reporting systems—not the technical aspects. Focus on how your system has been used with other clients. You succeed when you sell benefits, not features. Features are what the reports do; benefits are why the client should care.

Experience

Message 5: We've done this before. You will benefit from our experience.

Once you understand what your prospective clients value most, it is time to assure them that you are able to deliver it. You may need the help of your current clients.

Study participants who don't use a staffing firm were asked what they most wanted to know before starting a relationship with a staffing firm. Referrals and examples of helping similar companies were the most common responses.

If a prospective client is struggling because of the poor quality of employees received in the past, show a case study and a client testimonial that speak to your record of placing high-quality employees. If turnover has been the client's headache, provide specific examples of other companies for which you have helped solve this problem and what those companies said about your service.

More valuable than anything you can say, a single heartfelt endorsement from a current client can help convince prospective clients how much you value their business.

Keep Spreading Your Message

These five messages collectively will help you reach current and prospective clients with a brand identity that they will hear and remember. But building your brand awareness and reputation is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes years to effectively build your brand in the eyes of your target market.

Moreover, it takes effort to reinforce your brand in the eyes of your existing clients. To keep them as clients, you'll have to reinforce these messages as you continue to serve them.

The most important thing to remember is that brand building doesn't happen only by placing an advertisement in a newspaper or mailing a brochure to your clients. It happens every hour of every day, through each contact you have with each current and prospective client. The goal of building brand awareness

is large, but there are plenty of opportunities to achieve it.

Eric Gregg is managing partner of iLoyalty, a developer of client and employee feedback systems for the staffing industry. For more information, visit theloyalclient.com. To comment on the article, e-mail success@americanstaffing.net

The Industry Brand

The ASA advertising campaign, "America's Staffing Companies. We Work for You," is raising the awareness and profile of the staffing industry and the services it provides.

The ads focus on the work force flexibility and access to talent provided by staffing firms. According to ASA market research, these are the two key messages—and fundamental client values—that resonate most broadly with staffing clients.

ASA research also showed that human resource professionals are the people principally involved in staffing decisions. ASA is running ads in human resource trade magazines and on job board Web sites used by human resource professionals. The ads appear in *HR Magazine*, *Human Resource Executive*, *Workforce Management*, and *Staffing Management*. Online, ASA banner ads appear in job posting sections of three prominent job boards—CareerBuilder, Monster, and Yahoo HotJobs—and on the Web site of the Society for Human Resource Management.

Want to find out more? See all the industry marketing campaign has to offer at americanstaffing.net. You can view the print and online ads, review the media schedule, read about the public relations components of the multifaceted campaign, and learn how to leverage the campaign to work for your company.

"This powerful campaign is working to expand perceptions of our companies and services," says ASA immediate past chairman David Bartholomew, chief executive officer of Staffmark. "Communicating this image will go a long way to raise the profile of the industry and ASA member companies in the eyes of our clients. By increasing awareness and improving the perception of the staffing industry, the campaign will surely succeed in getting more clients to use more staffing services more often."

Jennifer Butsch is director of public relations for the American Staffing Association.

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