

COMMUNICATING QUALITY

To no surprise, quality is one of the words that comes up regularly with our clients. Quality is value, especially in industrial B2B environments. It thus needs to be communicated. But how? Quality is also one of the most overused words, having lost all its power and meaning. Claiming quality needs more than the word itself. This paper gives some hints on how to efficiently convey the image of quality ... without naming it.

A SIMPLE MIND GAME

Let's try a simple mind game: Imagine you are the purchasing manager in some kind of industrial b2b market - let's say machinery. Quality and reliability is what you are after. And there are two suppliers that you know well for many years. You have collected business cards from many contacts inside both companies. Now you have all these cards in front of you to sort them out. Company A has a fancy logo but all the cards are looking slightly different, in shape, layout, paper quality and color shades. Company B has a clear and simple design and all cards look exactly the same. Intuitively, which company will you credit for better quality, A or B?



AVOID DISSONANCE

We are not talking about the necessary respect of design rules here. We are talking about the dissonance of implicit and explicit messages. If you come, as we do, across many companies that claim highest standards in quality (or innovation, or sustainability or social responsibility or whatever the buzz word might be) and you see that their b2b communication *implicitly* tells a complete different story, than these apparently superficial contradictions acquire a totally different meaning. And even more so since there are competitors out there telling powerful stories about quality without a need for even pronouncing the words.

FIGHT DISTRUST

Nobody any longer believes in claims, not even if they come with proofs. Why should it be different? We are used to everything but the truth. We all have learned to distrust in “communication”. And in basic b2b communications, “quality” (and innovation, and sustainability and social responsibility or whatever the buzz word might be) is certainly among the most abused words we can imagine. Repeating them again and again only adds to the subjacent distrust these terms are invariably linked to. So how can you convince people that your product really is superior in quality? That you are really pushing for innovation?

BE CONVINCED

First of all: be honest with yourself. Is your offering really as thriving as your company claims it to be? Or is management pushing for a price premium through the fast lane, lacking sincere efforts and investment? If, after some critical introspection, you are deep down convinced that what you have in hand *is* good, you will have a chance to find the right expression. Otherwise you’d better spend your time and energy in first getting some real progress. Well let’s think you’ve got it, and some focus group testing has confirmed it: your product is of superior quality. Now you want to communicate this. As said above, preaching “quality” in your presentation texts will only bore the audience. So, what else?

SAY IT EXPLICITLY

When the one word is meaningless, there is still plenty of ways to get the meaning across. The simpler the speech, the more factual the approach and the more powerful the images, the more likely you will be convincing. Telling people about your journey towards quality is more convincing than just claiming the final destination. Others may speak for you, too, for example through testimonials. Pictures transmit much more information than words and therefore help people to determine whether a message is trustworthy or not. Tangible facts such as warranty periods and after sales service engagements offer clear orientation.



SAY IT IMPLICITLY

In advertising, as in real life, people rarely judge by a single piece of information. But a stream of (converging) information invariably forges a (strong) opinion. Such information can be a combination of hard facts (such as your granted warranty period), or soft facts (such as your credibility as a sales person or a brand). Consistent facts have a much higher significance than isolated ones and therefore create credibility more easily. To claim quality, you need to show it through multiple facets.



BE CONSISTENT

In industrial markets, your contact points with customers are generally a very few - and therefore precious. Hence, any of these contact points needs to contribute to a consistent message. You simply can't effort any point of inconsistency. This is even more the case when it comes to the notion of quality, since consistency is an evident expression of organization. And organization, in turn, is fundamental to quality. All industry managers have been trained by experience to recognize this link as patent. While only a very few people will consciously analyze the consistency of subliminal messages linked to a specific offering, subconsciously, most people do - and even benchmark with competitors.

BRAND FOR QUALITY

Communication is everywhere. It doesn't necessarily take the front door to get in. But it filters through the slightest gap : a quotation or invoice, an email signature, a telephone call to the reception desk, the carpet at your entrance, the product design, an interface, and - yes - it also comes through the front door, i.e. your sales literature. Making all this consistent generally is the role of branding. But often enough, true-life consistency ends with the last page of the brand book. On the other hand, only full implementation, i.e. total quality on all communication channels, provides the ultimate credibility that you should strive for.



CONCLUSION

Expressing quality is more than talking about quality. Like no other term in b2b communication, quality needs to be demonstrated. And organization is the best way to do so, since it tells people implicitly that you have things in place to produce quality. Communication can express a high level of organization through coherent design of all communication tools, identical user experiences and design continuity.

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