

Some things don't change. Over two decades of focus groups with IT has yielded insight and universal truths for all communications to IT management.

IT Managers Tell You How to Talk to Them – if You Listen

By Gib Trub

The More Things Change...

We've stared through the one-way glass at technology professionals of all flavors, who have shared their opinions on everything from PC purchasing to network management to backup and recovery systems. These focus groups have gathered in every corner of the world. While the topics and quality of the coffee have varied, there has been a pattern of opinion and behavior worth paying attention to, no matter what the communications assignment.

Here are 10 insights into how IT thinks and behaves that you can bank on when developing marketing communications for IT professionals, no matter what product or service you are hawking.

1. What's in it for me?

The ability to comprehend is not the same as the motivation to understand or the willingness to buy. In other words, just because they have an engineering degree and can follow along doesn't

mean they will – unless you present what's in it for them clearly. Up front.

These folks are time-stretched. They rarely read the trade publications and when they do it's as fast as they can. And they only pause when they can see a solution to a problem that currently hurts. Or in some cases, a solution to a problem they didn't even know they had.

2. Take your acronym and...

Turns out no one really wants to learn another acronym in their lifetime. Even if it's easy. Even if it's memorable. Even if they're already your best customer.

We listened recently to a die-hard user of a client's software solution tick off the various iterations of architecture and product acronyms that he had been subjected to by that client over the years. In the end he said, "Man, just say what it does!" Words to market by.

3. *Woe is me.*

Or “How come I have to always do more with less when the work load keeps getting bigger. They all think that way, no matter how high up they are. “Show me the money” (or a nice time/cost analysis) and you can make their hearts flutter -- especially if they’re sitting on top of the organizational chart.

A message that promises to lessen the pain resonates with the soldiers who keep everything running every day. Particularly if the promise is to remove day-to-day drudgery.

4. *Can’t we just be friends?*

You think you and your customers are married – they think you’re dating. If the company is bigger than a bread box, they’ve got hardware and software from multiple vendors. And while they may standardize some relationships (yes, like Microsoft), they’re always on the prowl. And they can imagine life without you.

The answer is to create messaging programs that directly address your customers, their needs, and their perceptions. If your customer list is weak, make it a priority to shore it up – and an indirect sales channel is a barrier you can overcome.

5. *It’s been a long time since I knew what I was talking about.*

If technology professionals have a title higher than “Director,” they haven’t actually read a white paper or written a line of code since the first Bush was in the White House. The higher your target, the clearer the benefit needs to be. (See #2 above)

These folks see technology issues from a conceptual level. The most frequent mistake made is to direct fuzzy, feel-good brand advertising to these folks. They don’t have the time or interest for that. What they do want is information that addresses one of their specific issues, supportable statements that gives them permission to believe the marketing claims, and offers a strong, immediate call to action.

6. *I tell my boss what to think.*

IT managers working for someone with a Director title do the technical reviewing. And they’ve generally got more opinions than FTD has flowers. But they also can’t approve anything over \$500, so relying on them without any buy-in from above is risky

However, providing a solution to their specific day-to-day problems will get their attention. With that motivation, they are generally happy to use fulfillment material that helps provide education and a business case to their boss.

7. *I can’t see the forest.*

Another thing about these lower level techies, they work on projects they didn’t define. They don’t want to know from architectures. They care very much that the vendor who has the greatest market share is on their resume (so they can get somewhere else). And they never met a cost analysis argument they personally cared one bit about.

A message that appeals to their under-nourished self-esteem will often hit the mark.

8. *I used to love you, then you merged.*

While the stock market usually rewards the company that’s acquired, the customer base immediately starts looking to its competitors. The prevailing belief is that whatever the product (hardware or software), it will be dumped or screwed up by the new guys. And none of the folks I used to know will be there anymore.

Step one is direct communication with the installed base from both sides. Send them a letter from the President. E-mail is even better. If you have a user pub, make it an ongoing forum both through specific advertising messages and editorial. Make them an offer you don’t make to the general market (and make sure they know it’s special). Do everything you can do to ease the initial distrust

and inclination to check on competitive solutions.

9. Don't tell me I did it all wrong.

The first thing every senior IT manager thinks about when confronting new technology is how it will play with the infrastructure they've already built. If they think it has to change radically you're gone.

Let them know that you can play nicely by working with every conceivable technology brand and they'll be more willing to listen.

10. What's in a name?

Technology pros are risk averse, and that's truer than ever right now. When asked who in general they would like to see provide a given solution they will always mention large established brands because they trust that the vendor will be there tomorrow and they'll probably still have a job even if the vendor fails to deliver as promised.

The bottom line

IT managers know that real innovation is likely to occur in a company they've never heard of or considered before. But to overcome their concerns, you need to convince them that they can experience some unique benefit right away. And it needs to be specific to today's needs – no promises of flexibility or scalability or time to market. They'll make those extrapolations on their own.

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