

IN-HOUSE ISSUES

SELL LIKE HELL

You may think that because you have internal clients, you don't have to worry about selling your services. But learning how to market your team and demonstrate your bottom-line value is the key to keeping—and loving—your job.

Marketing is the most neglected tactic an in-house team should be using to improve its standing within the company. In one AIGA in-house survey, more than 60% of the respondents admitted to not marketing their skills internally. In-house teams mistakenly believe that this is unnecessary—that they have a built-in client base. Even if that's true, which it often isn't, it's important to establish and re-establish yourself as a valuable creative resource and expand upon the types of support you offer. Otherwise, when the bean counters start looking for ways to reduce overhead, your in-house team runs the risk of being targeted as expendable.

I'm going to start with a simple list of the obvious ways to sell yourself and your team and then venture into some softer sell strategies. You can:

- Conduct lunch and learns.
- Hold capabilities presentations.
- Create a promotional website.
- Distribute a promotional brochure and CD.
- Develop a marketing campaign.
- Send an e-mail blast.
- Present case studies.

In addition, there are a number of less obvious, but equally important, ways to sell yourself, your team and the value of design.

TELL TALL TALES

You're in an elevator when you notice you're alone with a potential client. You could sidle up to him and rattle off a bullet point list of your team's strengths: agency-quality staff, state-of-the-art Macs, efficient standard operating procedures, project-management solutions,

etc. Chances are that he'll forget everything you said within 30 seconds of exiting the elevator. Or you could tell the story about how you pulled a project that one of his co-workers gave you out of the fire. It had a ridiculously tight deadline with unclear objectives and multiple stakeholders. Your team worked with that client to address those issues and successfully deliver the materials that resulted in unprecedented sales. I'll bet the potential client will remember that pitch.

Stories that illustrate your value resonate much more powerfully with others than a laundry list of features. Hone your storytelling skills and leave the details to an e-mail follow-up or brochure.

TAKE IT PERSONALLY

There is no more powerful way to sell yourself and your group than to establish personal relationships with your clients and upper management. As much as you may want it to be about the quality of the work you produce and the value you bring to the company, human nature dictates that you need to establish personal bonds with others in your company. This generates a level of understanding, trust and mutual respect. Bonding is the currency of corporate culture, the grease that allows the engine of the creative process to chug along.

This means that you have to get out from behind your beloved monitor and press the flesh. If you're physically situated close enough to your clients to walk over and discuss an issue with them instead of picking up the phone, then take the extra steps.

Tim O'Donnell, a senior designer in the Global Strategic Design team at Johnson & Johnson, told me

how he makes it a point to venture out from his team's great studio in New York to meet face-to-face with his clients in New Jersey on a regular basis. Though it isn't necessary for him to do that with the technological infrastructure at his disposal, he's found that it helps him in dealing with his clients on a day-to-day basis. When disagreements arise, he's in a much better position to resolve the issues as a result of his outreach.

Lunches are a great opportunity to meet with colleagues and clients in a less formal and less stressful setting. Conversations about family, personal pursuits and interests also help create mutual appreciation and inject a human element into your relationship (never a bad thing in the corporate world).

These suggestions are not about buttering up the client, but are about creating opportunities to find common ground, understand each other and have a personal stake in each others' success.

And finally, understand and communicate your value proposition to your company. When you're selling something, it's a good idea to know what it actually is that you're selling. For in-house teams dealing with upper management, that means selling the value that you bring to them and the company. Your management team isn't primarily interested in the specifics of your group—how many computers you have, how many awards you've won or even who's on your team. What they really want to know is how the existence of your group contributes to the profitability of the company.

There are basically two ways your team impacts the company's bottom line. You either help the company make more money, or help the company save money by providing the most cost-effective option for producing marketing materials. That's it.

PROFIT FROM PROFIT

Making the case for how your team enhances the sales of the products or services your company markets is the tougher sell of the two value propositions. This is because it's hard to tease out the factors that contribute to the success of a product or service brought to market. It could be that promotional incentives, superior offerings or a cracker-jack sales force were the main drivers of sales. There could be external factors independent of the company's efforts that impacted sales numbers.

The best way to document this value statement is to determine when new marketing materials are introduced for an existing product or service and, after a period of time, look for a spike in sales. The other, more difficult, option is to compare your company's sales upon the introduction of new marketing materials to total market share (your competitors'sales).

There are other, more nuanced, ways your team contributes to profitability. For example, even if your team doesn't create consumer pieces, arguably the collateral most responsible for enhancing sales, you might be responsible for creating sales aids and educational materials that empower your sales force to more effectively sell your product to retailers.

Speed to market is another area that makes your team a driver of profits. Unlike outside resources

that may want to add time to a project because that translates into more billable hours, you're driven to be as efficient as possible. This results in getting promotional materials to market more quickly, which leads to more time in front of customers and higher sales volume.

An adjunct to this value proposition is the establishment of metrics by which the success and contributions of your team can be more easily assessed than by combing through sales reports. Work with upper management to gauge their expectations, turn those expectations into clear measurable goals for you and your team, and establish a time frame and method for determining if your team meets those goals on a quarterly basis.

For example, your company may want to present the corporate brand in a more powerful and consistent manner. You and your team can propose specific strategies and tactics on how best to achieve that goal. Your group could sample and assess current corporate communications and marketing materials and work with upper management to establish and document branding standards, which would then be distributed to all internal and external groups that create those materials. Your team could also be included in the review process to ensure that the materials being considered meet the brand standards you established. An assessment of the program in six to 12 months, where the newer materials are compared to older materials, will showcase how effective your team's efforts have been.

COUNT COSTS

On the cost-savings front, you need to be able to effectively compare your costs for providing creative services to the costs of the other options that your company has access to. This can become a slippery slope if not handled correctly.

Whatever you do, do not position this conversation as addressing the value of the design function itself. Be cautious and don't assign dollar amounts to design artifacts by saying, "I can get the cost for a sales brochure down to a thousand dollars! Whaddaya think!?" If you ever go down that path in discussions with your upper management team, not only will you bungle your attempt to gain resources and stature for your team, but you'll also damage the perception of the value of design and turn it into a commodity in the eyes of your business peers.

What this conversation is, is a well-reasoned, financially unassailable proposition on the value that in-house creative teams bring to their companies. It's about in-house design as a business model.

Simply put, well-positioned, well-run and properly resourced in-house teams are more cost effective and efficient than working with outside agencies on many design projects. There are hard, as well as soft savings, though make no mistake that the soft savings result in real dollar cost efficiencies, too.

HARD SAVINGS

Documenting your real or potential cost efficiencies will involve some investigative legwork. You'll have to

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gather hard data that benchmarks your costs against those of existing or future vendors. The most basic point of comparison is hourly rates. Reach out to procurement or accounts payable to get the agency rates. For your rates, add up the salaries of all people on your team and add in an additional 35% for full-time employees to account for benefits. Divide the total by the number of staff on your team to get a blended annual rate per staff member. Then divide this figure by 1,920 hours (48 weeks x 40 hours). This will give you the blended hourly rate per person. (Note: 48 weeks was used to take into account vacation, holidays and sick days.) You can then present the agency/design firm costs side by side with your costs.

Be aware that this formula doesn't take into account overhead other than your salaries, such as office space and utilities. It therefore could be argued that you're not comparing apples to apples. If you put this formula into the context of your company's fixed operating costs, though, it actually speaks to a key advantage of having an in-house department: the leveraging of existing corporate assets to gain additional value. Simply put, it's most likely that your company has made commitments for office space and contracts for office services that, whether or not your team was there, would have to be paid for. In essence, your company is using these resources (which otherwise may have gone to waste) to better effect than paying agency rates that have to include the agency's operating overhead, such as rent and equipment.

This rationale can be extended to personnel. An outside firm has to employ staff to handle non-design functions such as human resources, bookkeeping and legal functions. Your company can leverage its existing staff in finance, HR, operations, etc. to support your team at no additional cost to its marketing budget. Taking this a step further, your in-house team's structure is most likely flatter than an outside design firm's. While they may have account executives, traffic managers and project coordinators that add cost to their projects, many of these functions are likely being handled by your design staff, further reducing overhead (and possibly adding efficiencies).

Outside of illustrating the value gained by leveraging fixed corporate assets, this assessment will also highlight the fundamental fact that your team is based on a nonprofit model where you're incentivized to save money in every way possible (of course without sacrificing quality). That means that there is no markup on your hourly staff costs, that any out-of-pocket expenses are a pass-through with no handling fees being added on, and that projects are not worked on a minute longer than they need to be.

SOFT SAVINGS

There are many non-design functions your team provides to save your company money that external partners cannot provide. Your team has a broad and deep understanding of the marketing, review, and creative procedures and policies established by your company. Aside from the obvious efficiencies this affords you and your company in the production of deliverables,

you're also in the unique position to assist in the training and support of new marketing hires in these areas. Your team can guide your clients and other partners on how to most efficiently move their projects through the often complicated processes of project initiation, creation, review and revisions so they can be more productive by spending more time on their core strategic competencies and less on project logistics.

Your added value also includes the branding knowledge that you and your team possess. Your group will catch unintended branding and compliance errors early in the creative process before the project gets to a stage where it would take much more time (and money) to correct.

The faster marketing materials are produced, the greater the cost savings. Fewer hours spent on a particular job means lower costs. Your team's "speed to market" efficiencies and advantages over agencies include quicker learning curves than agencies on new projects, incentives to shorten turnaround times and greater access to clients, as well as the previously mentioned knowledge of brand and regulatory approval processes your team possesses.

In addition to accessibility, the familiarity and relationships you have with your clients affords your team insights into their needs and communication styles that not only allow you to reach design solutions more quickly, but also can enhance the quality of the designs. There are opportunities to establish levels of trust, achieved from an acknowledgment that you and your clients are both on the same team with the same goals, that can result in creative freedom and access to increased resources that would never occur in relationships with outside agencies.

Keep in mind that the two value propositions—hard and soft savings—are not mutually exclusive. Depending on the mix of deliverables that you provide to your company, you may embody both. Bottom line, though, is that this sell is about the bottom line.

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WEB EXTRA

For more in-house insights from Andy Epstein, check out "37 Ways to Get Fired."

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