

# Competitive Advantage: Having It And Selling It

by Fred Firestone

- Does your company have a competitive advantage?
- Does your company have a “perceived” competitive advantage?
- Do you know you’re right for your prospects, but they don’t necessarily see it that way?
- Are your sales consistent with the value you bring to the marketplace?

Alka-Seltzer time? Maybe not.

Whether your business is accounting services, gasoline, groceries, healthcare, software or men’s suits, your customers want essentially two things. They want your offering (product or service) to solve a particular problem they have—buying gas so their car will continue to run. And, they want a buying experience that conveys integrity, confidence and trust.

Since the primary objective of your business is to keep and grow your market share, you must look to continually differentiate your products and services from those of the competition. If you’re giving customers more of what they want, they’ll give you more of what you want—their business.

Your differentiation plan is crucial to your success. In today’s market, with “equality” of many products and services, it becomes increasingly more difficult to stand out with an offering that will provide a better solution to a

customer’s problem. Does anyone really question the fact that “gas is gas” and that it all works about the same in our cars, notwithstanding advertising messages to the contrary?

While there may be very little difference between your products or services and your competitors, there are innumerable ways of differentiating by giving your customer a better buying experience from that offered by the competition. Again, the service station. A few years ago, we were doing a series of differentiation seminars for Shell dealers. In Michigan, a dealer approached me and explained how he was selling more full-service gasoline than anybody in town and that he was charging a higher price. I was intrigued and inquired how this was happening. He answered with an explanation of an occurrence that happened with regularity every Saturday: A car pulls into full service with a kid in the back seat; attendant taps on the back window; the kid lowers the window and is presented with a helium balloon, complete with the station’s name. Needless to say, a happy kid begets a happy parent, which begets a fill-up, drinks and repeat business.

Further, the dealer tells me that the following occurs on Saturday mornings in that Michigan town: kids get in the family car and state their requests for the day: “Let’s go to the park; let’s go to McDonalds; and, let’s go to the Shell station.” This Shell owner redefined who his customer was and differentiated his product by giving his “customers” a good feeling in the buying process. He transformed the customer

mindset from “we’ve got to go to the Shell station” to “we get to go”! Did that dealer’s gas work any better than anybody else’s? Hardly.

The plan then is to:

1. Find ways of discerning what it will take to make your offerings more valuable to customers than what’s being offered by the competition.
2. Package your offerings so that they include these competitive advantages.
3. Effectively communicate to prospects the advantages of your offerings so that they purchase them.

It sounds so simple. It’s not. Have you ever knocked on the door of a prospect armed with compelling reasons why they should own your products and services and gotten the response, “Send us your literature and we’ll keep it on file”? You protest to no avail. “But Mr./Ms. Prospect, we’re the value-added provider!” Just as you have to continuously improve the value of your products and services, your sales force has to continuously improve its effectiveness at working through the “buyer maze” that is conditioned to treat these products and services as commodities. It’s all about regularly moving a greater percentage of prospects from the point where they tell you, “we already have what you offer,” or “send me your literature,” to the point where they are owners of the unique advantages you bring to the marketplace.

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