

Give Your Niche a Personality

by Dr. Lynda Falkenstein

Continuing MarketShare's focus this year on what makes A/E/C firms successful, Dr. Lynda Falkenstein, aka "The Niche Doctor," offers us her secret for successfully creating and maintaining a market niche for your firm.

Getting a niche is one thing. Ensuring the right people know about it and come swarming to your door can be quite another. One of the best, easiest, and often times least expensive ways to make this happen is by the simple act of giving your niche a personality. Some of the most successful companies in the world do this already.

One of my all-time favorites is the Mavis Beacon product line. If you frequent office products stores, you've likely seen Mavis Beacon products displayed prominently in the store's software section. It turns out that Mavis Beacon is the best selling typing program in the world with more than 6 million students using it annually. It also turns out that Mavis Beacon products are hard to miss during your stroll through the aisles of all the other software products. Hard to miss because taking up three-quarters of the front of the box is a full-color portrait of a vivacious, broad-smiling woman of color. The portrait exudes authority, success, and approachability. The remaining one-fourth of the box announces "Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing." If you're saying, "Ok, I get it. A great photo means great sales," read on.

That's only part of the story. It seems that even though it's top-of-the heap in sales, the Mavis Beacon company has a problem. It's the phone calls the company receives every day. Lots of phone calls. Not just orders; it's the other ones. You've already guessed it. The problem is the phone calls inviting Mavis Beacon to speak. Operators have to tell scores of people that Mavis Beacon is not available to keynote their national meetings. She can't talk to students. She can't do any special programs, no matter how big or important. Mavis Beacon isn't

being snooty or unfriendly. The problem is Mavis Beacon doesn't exist.

To understand the importance of this example, just imagine if there were no photo on the front of the box. If what the product did was emphasized, instead of the personality. Like so many others on the market today without the perceived human behind it, Mavis Beacon would be just another in the pack, instead of the leader. People buy people.

That personality marketing applies to just about any commodity or service is further illustrated in the Roy Rogers – Hardee's near disaster. The King of the Cowboys was also king of entrepreneurs, with his name appearing on everything from lunch boxes to alarm clocks to a highly lucrative restaurant chain. The chain was so lucrative, in fact, that in 1992 Hardee's bought the Roy Rogers Family fast-food restaurant chain, in which the Rogers family still had a stake. Shortly after buying the chain, Hardee's changed the restaurant's name. And again, you've guessed it. Customers

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Dr. Lynda Falkenstein
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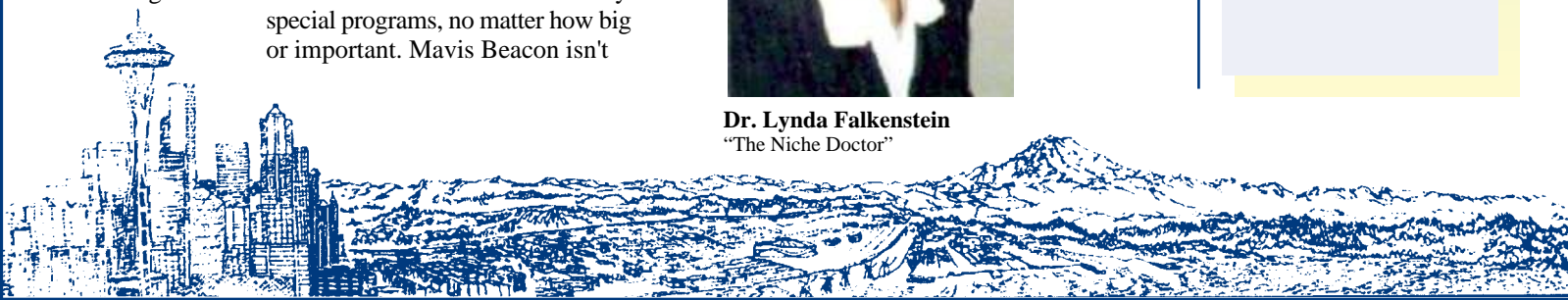
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disappeared in droves. Dumb once, but not twice, Hardee's restored the Roy Roger's logo. Customers returned. People buy people.

Yes, examples abound in every sector. From Salton paying George Foreman \$137.5 million for use of his name in selling grills and food-preparation products, to Donald Trump whose ultimate savvy appears to be in marketing his name. Ed Koch, New York City's former mayor, was quoted describing what he perceived to be Trump's skills: "What he has done is to merchandise his name, so if a building has his name it commands more money." People buy people.

The moral of this story has enormous implications for every business of every size and flavor. It is especially critical, however, for firms selling a professional service. In a professional service, the product is not a tangible widget, but something far more exciting and powerful. The product is you. It makes sense then, that in an era when competition is fierce and change rampant, the savvy company will market the one thing that remains a constant. The one thing that no one can take away from you. A personality. And, of course, you already know the reason. People buy people.

Check out Your Niche's Health

Take the following self-test to find out how healthy your own firm's niche is. Answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Am I (my firm) perceived as the only game in town?
2. Do people consider my service first and price later?
3. Am I perceived as sufficiently special that prospective clients/customers can tell me apart from the masses of otherwise excellent professionals in similar fields?
4. Do I know clearly who my target clients are?
5. Do I know who my target clients aren't?
6. Am I prepared to turn down certain kinds of business if it detracts from my niche?
7. Can clients tell what I stand for?
8. Is my niche evolving/refining all the time?
9. Is my niche one that a prospective audience wants?
10. Do I have a plan and delivery system that can effectively convey to the right audience the need for my niche?
11. Do I know the life-cycle of my niche?
12. Can my niche be "rolled out" into a variety of products or services (profit centers)?

13. Will my niche take me where I want to go; that is, will the niche actively contribute to achieving the goals I have set out?

14. Do I know what my client's most important goals really are?

15. Do my clients truly believe I am committed to what they perceive to be their best interests?

How to score: Count total yeses

15: Excellent, but stay vigilant and marketing aggressively because niching never ends. It's time now to think about your re-niche.

13-14: Above average but there is no such thing as "almost niched." Step up the pace.

11-12: Niche slippage evident. Caution.

10: Take time off. Hole up with yourself and employees and do serious niche surgery. Your company's life depends upon it.

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Dr. Lynda Falkenstein, author of internationally acclaimed NICHECRAFT: Using Your Specialness to Focus Your Business, Corner Your Market, and Make Customers Seek You Out, is the foremost authority on creating the niche that protects you and your business in any economy. President of Falkenstein Learning Corporation, Dr. Falkenstein has defined a critical 9-step process for achieving focus that generates profits and growth by identifying opportunities even in the harshest of economic downturns or the wildest of technological changes.

Dr. Falkenstein's seminars and training programs are presented worldwide, both on-site and via telephone conferencing. She also consults privately with leading companies throughout the world. Her columns appear regularly in scores of newspapers, trade and professional publications throughout the country. She is author of several publications, including Consulting for Profit: How to Start and Grow a Profitable Consulting Practice; and Don't Just Retire-Reformat: Turning Your Life Experiences into Prosperity and Personal Happiness. Her newest book, Lucrative Consulting: How to Building an Explosive Consulting Business NOW! is scheduled for release shortly.

Dr. Falkenstein is based in Portland, Oregon. She earned her doctorate from Stanford University where her research focused on the diffusion of innovations, i.e. if you invent a better mousetrap, how do you get it to market!

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