

# TOP 10

## Ten questions every board director needs to ask about marketing

*By Brett de Hoedt, Hootville*

**Marketing is key to the success of your organisation.**

**When it's done effectively, marketing makes everything easier – recruiting staff, volunteers and supporters, filling programs, advocating for your cause – and all these elements are key to your reason for being: the fulfilment of your mission. Marketing is a worthwhile investment but one that too few boards make.**

### 1. How well do we *really* know our audiences?

When I speak with talented marketers – many of them from highly accountable endeavours such as retail, politics or fundraising – I am staggered at how well they know their audiences. Their insights go far beyond broad sweeping understandings of age, location and occupation.

In thinking about your audience (your members, clients, users, customers, participants, whatever you call them), consider these questions:

**Triggers:** What leads people to use, support, or refer to you? Is it a diagnosis, a time of year, a milestone in their personal or business life? Have they just graduated, retired or got their kids off their hands? At certain times the same person will be much more or less likely to connect to you.

**Pathways:** Are they local? Are people coming to you voluntarily or because they have little choice? Why are some choosing your competitors?

**Issues:** What are the questions they have or the problems they want you to solve? People new to disability, childcare or aged care services may need a lot of education about the system and their options.

**Emotions:** The best marketers know the emotional state of their customers. You may be able to identify and ride a wave of anger or disillusionment in the community (our teal political candidates certainly did). The best marketers understand those emotions and respond to them when they occur naturally. Animals Australia does this well. Your customers may be in a state of shock or fear and coming to you only reluctantly. This is particularly true for disease-based support groups or those dealing with death or bereavement.

**Barriers:** What barriers stand between you and your prospects? What are the questions, concerns or pre-conceived ideas you have to overcome to get them onboard? What's your value proposition in this regard? You already know about this if you've read my [blog post on the Conversion Formula](#).

Note: not all people are created equal. Some people will use or support you far more actively and profitably than others over their "lifetime" with you. This concept is known as **customer lifetime value** or CLV and I've written about it in a [LinkedIn post](#). You need to know who offers you the most value, seek them out and cater to them.



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## 2. Hey, what's our brand?

It's tempting to be like everyone else, but the most successful brands stand apart against their competitors. Successful brands deliberately decide to hold a particular association, position or reputation in the minds of their audiences. Brands may be seen as upmarket, cheap, traditional, political, youthful, ethical, maverick, prestigious, patriotic, proudly local or excitingly exotic – anything but generic, boring or governmental. The personality of your brand is up to you, but it should help you connect with your desired audiences.

Perhaps you will be the brand that *truly understands* the issues that are important to your audience. Religions – particularly new evangelical Christian varieties – are very good at this.

Maybe you are the brand that truly understands a particular disease, situation, cultural identity, stage of life or location. Perhaps you are the brand that goes out of its way to be environmentally friendly and aligns itself with social justice causes.

Or you might be a passionate brand that stops at nothing to serve your cause (Animals Australia, Sea Shepherd Foundation, Doctor Without Borders).

Your brand's values should pass the four Ds test in that they should be:

**Deliberate:** Stop, consider your brand, and deliberately choose a personality and values for it. It must be a conscious decision and one made in the context of your sector and competition. You can do this at any time.

**Distinctive:** Stand out from the crowd.

**Deliverable:** Don't promise what you can't deliver.

**(in your) DNA:** Your brand personality should be an authentic extension of something that is unique to your organisation. This may be based on your heritage, your location, the nature of your staff or a passionately held philosophy. Religions are a fine example of this, for better or worse. Likewise, Greenpeace, Guide Dogs Australia and the Salvation Army have certain values that are manifest across their varied enterprises.

Once decided, you can go about reinforcing your brand on your website, in all your marketing, and elsewhere. Your brand should shape everything you do. [More in this LinkedIn post.](#)

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### 3. Is our website working hard enough for us?

**Likely answer: not even close!**

Almost everyone who does business with you will at some stage check you out online – most likely during their all-important “appraisal” or “browsing” stage. You need to grab these people and quickly win them over! (After all, how long do you spend on a dud website?)

Think of your website as the perfect employee – ready and able 24 hours a day, meeting the needs of strangers and friends alike, explaining who you are to the world, persuading people to use, believe and trust you. A good website can sell, donate, administer memberships and inform. What a worker! And it doesn't even have a union!

The board needs to ask: is our website really meeting the needs of our key audiences?

Those audiences may include strangers who are just “checking you out” for the first time and want a lot of information and are hoping to find you credible. Are you sufficiently explaining who you are, what you offer and why you and you alone are the smart choice? What first impression do you give?

Another key audience is people who already know you and want to stay informed and connected. This audience requires less explanation or proof of your credibility but they may be more demanding in terms of news and analysis of developments in your world, or they may wish to efficiently transact with you – renew a membership, book an event, make a donation, etc.

[More in this LinkedIn post.](#)



## 4. Are social media and video worth the bother?

You need to have a solid reason for spending time and energy on social media. Is it to campaign and advocate? Cool. Is it to appear hip and relevant? Hmmmm. Is it to connect with your existing audiences? If so, boring old email may be a better option.

Does your board receive reports on followers and engagement regularly? It should. Is your following growing? Are your existing followers engaged? The facts may not make for pleasant reading. And if you have a paid social media staff member, the results need to be astounding to justify the expense.

You need to know the sort of content that makes the greatest impact. Is it links to relevant news items, advice, opinion, analysis, how-to lists, videos, staff and service profiles? Someone on staff should know this. Stick to what works.

If your following is stagnant and your impact minimal (which is utterly common), consider being bold and investing your communications energy into something more fruitful.

I see a lot of local councils with the resources to constantly create videos, often featuring councillors on the spruik, local traders and community groups. Some videos are quite sophisticated, with fancy footage, music, graphics, staging and a lot of editing, but they attract negligible views.

One major council has just 317 YouTube subscribers but features a video catalogue to rival Netflix. Most of its productions enjoy views in the double digits. This is a wicked waste of energy.



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## 5. Is there value in doing media?

### **Answer: Do you really need to ask?**

There is *still* no better way to reach more people, more credibly with less effort than mainstream media coverage. Media coverage reaches new people and important people (government) courtesy of media monitoring companies.

Every client I've worked with has underestimated its media potential. If you have insights, expertise, data or passionate critique, or can provide access to interesting people, you have media potential.

Don't leave media appearances to your peak body or a competitor. You need to get your priorities recognised and build your own media relationships. There's an under-recognised connection between media exposure and fundraising and other forms of support.

Ask yourself:

- What are our organisation's issues, areas of expertise and priorities?
- What will we talk about and not talk about?
- Who are our experts and case studies?
- What data, information and intellectual property do we have to back up our claims?
- How do we find a way to make our issue particularly timely or pertinent so that media will have a reason to cover us?
- How can we create a visually arresting, unusual or attention-capturing event to draw more media coverage?

Worried that media will do you wrong? Make a point of perusing print and online outlets, radio and television to identify journalists and channels that are covering issues similar to yours in a responsible way. Make a list and approach them. You will need to be prepared to hustle, make lots of calls, send lots of follow-up information and be flexible. It costs very little money, a bit of time and quite a lot of effort. There's a risk of achieving nothing but that's showbiz, baby.

Consider collaborating with others to develop a multifaceted story idea. Perhaps a number of peer organisations could address the same core issue from various regional perspectives for different local media. Suddenly one story becomes five and you enjoy a wave of attention.

[Here's more on media in a LinkedIn post.](#)

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## 6. Is Google recommending us to the right people at the right time?

I am *staggered* at how little organisations invest in search engine optimisation (SEO). Good SEO means that search engines, primarily Google, recommend your website to the right people, at the right time, for the right search terms.

Organisations typically invest money in social media, printing, events, website design, pretty videos and logos, yet fail to invest in SEO. **SEO is more important than all of these other things.** Boards that would readily approve paying higher rent for a more prominent building in the hope of attracting passing pedestrian traffic won't spend far less dosh on SEO to attract more passing digital traffic. Silly.

Let's face it - if you're not appearing on page one of the appropriate Google results, you are effectively invisible. However, depending on what your organisation does, a good Google result (for NDIS services, for example) can mean tens of thousands of dollars. Once you get it right, with a little maintenance you can have a passive but consistent stream of prospects.

Good SEO is within your control, but it takes some skill, commitment and time. You'll likely need to find some external expertise initially. Be patient - you'll be measuring progress by the month, at best. Some changes are simple and require little expertise - the text on the page, the page name format and design. Other changes will be more technical (meta tags, links) and less visible, but all are important.

Test your SEO performance by logging out of your Google account and entering search terms that prospective customers may be entering. Where is your organisation appearing in the results for each search term? Note down the results. You can properly research these later. This is called keyword research and it is a slow, boring but vital task. Congratulations - you are on your way to better SEO.



## 7. Should we be investing more in communications staff?

Communications expertise doesn't come cheap. You likely need an all-rounder, but you should aspire to secure someone who can do more than fulfil specific tasks. You need someone who can advise and recommend. When you do find the right person be sure to free them to pursue the most impactful activities, some of which I mention in this article.

Media relations skills can be taught but if your person doesn't consume much news media, you are unlikely to gain much coverage as they won't have a feel for media opportunities.

Worse, if the individual is not a good copywriter you are in trouble as this is a skill that is rare, getting rarer and hard to develop. It's also very time-consuming to rewrite poor copy.

Be very demanding in the interview process. Don't be overly impressed by previous employers – drill down to find out what your candidate was *actually, personally* responsible for and the results they achieved. Did they make stuff happen – sales, influence, donations? Or were they simply communicating? I prefer the former.

Exposure to agency work experience or an active freelance background is a bonus. People who have worked for more clients and industries are likely to have picked up more tricks of the trade along the way. Frankly, agencies generally push their staff harder and are more results-oriented. Such folk may also know how to liaise with your own external agencies if you use any.

Can they pull together a campaign? How well do they know your audiences?

The best marketers want to make things happen.

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## 8. Could we be securing speaking opportunities?

Even in this digital age, the power of face-to-face communication cannot be beaten. Seeking speaking opportunities should be a part of any sophisticated marketing plan. The speakers may be you and your colleagues, your leaders or your clients. You might stage your own events or piggyback off other happenings.

Ask yourself:

- What does this organisation have to speak about? What is our expertise, what insights do we have?
- Who are our potential speakers?
- How do we train and prepare speakers to make the most of the spotlight?
- Where could we strut our stuff?

**You needn't be a limelight seeker to be an effective speaker but every speaker** will benefit from training that helps them discover what they want to say and the most engaging manner in which to say it. I've trained asylum seekers, school kids, sex workers and Olympians to be better speakers, and frankly, if the speaker has something to say and is open to coaching, they will do just great.

Where are your speaking opportunities? Think industry conferences, service clubs, business networks, chambers of commerce, webinars, events celebrating international awareness days, local government events, AGMs – if there's an audience you should have a speaker.



## 9. Could a network of referrers build our business?

I speak to a lot of marketers about all their clever ideas – referrers never get a mention.

Referrers come into contact with people who are ripe for the plucking but who don't know about your organisation. A referrer might be a childcare centre whose staff meet a lot of parents about to re-enter the workforce. Or it might be a real estate agency whose agents meet a lot of people relocating to the area. Regardless – referrers can steer the right people your way with very little effort. Referring people to you might even make them look good.

You need to **identify** everyone who can steer people your way. This might be individuals, certain professionals, local councillors, business networks, government departments, churches, schools, gyms, university or TAFE course coordinators, people running certain programs and rival organisations. They all meet prospects whom you do not.

In a time of staff and volunteer shortages, your current staff, clients and board members should all be leveraged for referrals.

You need to **recognise and reward referrers**; that reward might or might not be financial. You need to do this systematically and track the referrers who deliver you the best quality prospects and build those relationships.

Warning: GPs are overwhelmed with requests and schools are typically strong gatekeepers, but how about churches, gyms and local professionals such as loan brokers, personal trainers or lawyers? These people connect to people at certain times which may be just the shortcut you need.

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## 10. What's our crisis communications plan?

Bad things happen to good organisations, and when they do, you need a crisis communications plan. The plan should map out your response in relation to all stakeholders including partners, government, funders, media, supporters and clients. You'll need to cater to each of them differently.

Directors should know where the dangers lie long before they emerge. The specifics will differ but the issues likely to form the basis of your crisis are rogue employees or volunteers, claims of discrimination or bullying, financial mismanagement, an accident in your facility, redundancies, reductions of service and closures, price increases, or practices from long ago that no longer meet expectations.

A lot of the elements of crisis management can be planned in advance. You're likely to need to write a lot of words of explanation and, possibly, apology. You can draft these ahead of time, which will save you some precious hours when the SNAFU hits. Oh – and **practise your apologies**.

Media may want to cover your crisis, upping the ante significantly, which is why **I've written a whole check list on this**. You'll be tempted to shut journalists out, but this will only make you look defensive.

### About Brett de Hoedt

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