

Forget the USP – it's all about the SSP

Why firms should abandon the search for their USP in favour of finding their strategic selling point (SSP) – and how to communicate it effectively

Some brands are very good at expressing their unique selling points. Think of “When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight,” or “We’re number two. We try harder.” These positioning statements represent brands (FedEx and Avis, in this case) that have made it their mission to capture their USPs. But finding this ‘brand holy grail’ is without doubt an easier proposition when it comes to consumer brands, compared to the world of professional services.

Indeed, there’s plenty of evidence to support the view that the professional services USP is close to extinction. Take 15 minutes to browse a few professional service firms’ positioning statements and you’re likely to find that trying to identify a clear point of difference between a firm and its competitors can be a futile exercise.

Does it matter?

If finding one’s USP becomes laboured, does that mean there isn’t a USP to find? Is the only alternative generic brand marketing messages? As experts in business brand positioning, our answer is, of course, an emphatic NO – there’s always another way to effectively position your organisation. Charles Revson, founder of Revlon, once said he wasn’t selling makeup, he was selling hope. While this isn’t a customer-facing tagline, it’s certainly a fantastic platform for a compelling and creative brand positioning.

The usual suspects

Many professional services firms tend to rely on the usual suspects as a source of differentiation: history and heritage (although this is reassuring, it’s rarely unique), a professional approach (we sure hope so), as well as service excellence, attention to detail and expertise (again, these are qualities offered by many firms).

Most firms fit into one of these broad positioning strategies and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that; they’re all valid claims of brand position. Conversely, there are plenty of firms that don’t try to lay claim to any of the above, and take an approach based on ‘here’s a list of partners, here’s a list of practice areas – take your pick.’ Although there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with that position either, it’s putting the onus on the client to make the right connections.

Free yourself from the USP

So let’s abandon the pursuit of the endangered species that is the USP and look instead to define and articulate the SSP – the strategic selling point. Essentially, this is a brand strategy that works with the business to support and deliver the ambitions of the firm.

What are the advantages of an SSP? The obvious one is that a measurable short to medium-term objective can

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be used, for example: a 20% growth in corporate client revenues over three years for a largely private client firm, or securing a place in the *Sunday Times* Best 100 Companies rankings within five years. These are concrete business objectives, so the question then is how can the brand help deliver these ambitions? In the examples above, the firm would have a clear view of its target audience together with specific stories and proof points to communicate.

Time to find your SSP

While locating the almost extinct USP is a big challenge in professional services, this doesn't mean that the only alternative is to do nothing or to just follow the herd. Taking the time to include the right people in examining the firm's purpose and ambition thoroughly helps to develop a brand story which can be interpreted for both internal and external audiences. Finding and capturing the elusive SSP is still no easy feat, but unlike attempting to trap the USP, with the right approach, a skilled team and the best hunting tools, it's much more attainable and arguably will have a more profound impact on your firm in the long run.

Taking a step back

The starting point for differentiating your firm should of course be to take a step back and see the brand from your clients' point of view. An objective viewpoint is absolutely essential for effectively determining your differentiation strategy; you can't do this on your own. But using the right tools and tailoring them to your business can help you get to the heart of your brand in an informed and objective way. This gives you the creative ammunition and collective confidence to build a brand story that delivers differentiation and fits your business and your clients' needs, rather than just a superficial exercise in self-reflection.

Share the load

A crucial population that's often overlooked during the strategic planning process is your internal audiences. From partners to support staff, having a clear vision is something that everyone can aim for, with targets and an easy-to-digest image of what success will look like. Even setting relatively modest ambitions can create an atmosphere of quiet revolution. In the often risk-averse world of professional services, a practical ambition representing realistic and tangible change is something that all partners and staff can believe in and feel part of.

Do the maths

As you assess your differentiators, conducting a brand health check will help to evaluate the current state of both your brand and your business's overall health. Score yourself on a 1-10 scale against questions such as:

- Does the firm have a clear set of brand values?
- Does everyone understand them?
- Is the brand applied consistently?
- Is the brand evident in all business activities?
- Are we confident the brand is reaching our target market?
- Do our brand messages communicate the benefits that motivate our clients?
- Putting some numbers to your brand differentiation exercise can really focus hearts and minds.

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Communicating your SSP

If you already have a firm grasp on your business's differentiators, what do you do next? How do you communicate them to your chosen audiences? Here are 30 ways to develop a communications strategy, focusing on written and visual content, that conveys your SSP effectively.

Communications strategy and planning

1. **Plan your plan:** Make sure your communications plan is driven by your overall business strategy and that it involves the firm's leadership team. Define your goals, consider the risks and benefits and tailor actions to your resources and budget. Get a content strategy and plan in place and stick to it.
2. **Ask the audience:** Don't just guess at how your audience wants to receive your content – ask them.
3. **Play the long game:** Remember that the objective is to move the prospective client from interest to acquisition, and sometimes this process takes a long time. Sharing valuable content regularly will keep them connected to your business until they're ready to purchase, but be prepared to keep at it.
4. **Measure it:** How will success be measured? And what exactly do you mean by success? Accurate analytics are just as important as any of the tactical aspects of a marketing plan.

Content and idea generation

5. **Be ruthless with content:** Always make sure your content is relevant and engaging to your audience and gives them something of value. Remember that your audience's time is valuable, so don't bore them or turn them off with weaker content. Mix up different types of content if possible and use a variety of tools to allow for changes of pace.

6. **Don't reinvent the wheel every time:** If you know your content works and is well thought of within the industry, think about how you can apply the same format for other services, sectors or regions in which your firm is active. Tweak the content to get the right messages and tone of voice to suit your specific audience(s).
7. **Harness the power of research:** There are lots of issues-based surveys out there from professional services firms, but the principle behind them is a sound one – firms can show empathy with a targeted market segment both by the questions they ask and their interpretation of the results. Remember that designing the questions is as important as getting the responses.
8. **Give your clients a benchmark:** Ultimately, your content needs to open up the possibility of an informed conversation on the issues that matter to your clients and prospects. This should form the basis of the business case for your communications and anticipated return on investment.
9. **Let your success stories do the talking:** Involve your clients in your marketing. People want to understand how other organisations are addressing a particular issue. Qualitative, 'free-text' answers from survey respondents, for example, are often a valuable source of insight, so make the most of them.
10. **Keep an eye on the competition:** Do your homework on competing content already available. You can still focus on a topic if a competitor has already covered it – the key is to find new angles. For example, aim your content at a different audience or by company size or location.
11. **Involve the right people internally:** Usually this will be fee-earning subject matter experts able to tap into changing attitudes on a particular issue or trends among individuals or businesses. You'll need

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commitment and buyin to drive the idea forward – usually including someone with enough clout internally to 'own' it.

- 12. Find a good partner:** Give your content more weight by teaming up with other credible, non-competing organisations to produce it. For example, university research departments or reputable industry bodies.
- 13. Curate your website content carefully:** Websites too often become a dumping ground for information. Instead they should follow a meaningful editorial policy and be planned like other forms of marketing communications. It's about quality, not quantity.

Tools and channels

- 14. Own a channel:** Firms that stand out have found their communication tool of choice (blog, magazine, social media, press, etc.) and honed their skills in this area so that they're able to use it more effectively than other firms.
- 15. Don't just be digital first, be digital always:** In our increasingly digital world, clients' needs are changing. They want access to real-time information and insight. But it's not just about digital tools and platforms, it's about how digital is changing the world.
- 16. ...But not absolutely always...:** Depending on the demographics of your client base as well as the specific communication tool that's being used, you won't want to completely disregard print communications. Where are your customers most active? How do they make purchases? Consider this when determining your marketing mix.
- 17. Remember not everything is tweetable:** While there's an important role for digital and social media to present headlines and sound bites, the value of thought leadership is often in the detailed analysis.

This is not always possible in a 140-character tweet. Repurpose your content for each of your key marketing channels.

Getting your message across

- 18. Tell stories:** Talking in facts doesn't help differentiate your brand from others. Truly engaging with clients is much easier to do when your communications tell a story. Our brains process stories differently than lists of facts, and this helps us to remember the information.
- 19. Grab their attention:** Start your story in such a way as to grab your audience's attention and get to the point quickly. And don't forget a call to action at the end.
- 20. Be consistent across all platforms:** Always follow your brand style guide in any and every piece of external communication. Tone of voice is an especially important aspect, as it's critical to conveying a clear, easily digestible message. If you don't have a style guide yet, now may be the time to get one.
- 21. Think visually:** Think about whether your content can be presented graphically using charts, tables or infographics, rather than through words alone. And don't ignore the power of white space – sometimes less really is more. Consider reworking your written content in other formats that can stand alone such as infographics, presentations or videos.
- 22. Make it easy to locate content on your website:** People decide very quickly whether they're comfortable using your website and if they want to see more. Poor design will put users off straight away. They also won't spend long looking for what they want, so don't bury all of that carefully crafted content.

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- 23. Optimise for mobile:** Make sure your content is optimised for mobile devices, including for imagery, as users are more drawn to imagery than text. But be selective to support your content.
- 24. Get your internal comms right first:** Make sure your internal audience knows what's available across your communication platforms and stands behind the content, so they can share relevant content with their clients.

The power of the written word

- 25. Hook the audience straight away:** Headlines are your most powerful tool in hooking your audience so make them interesting and try to evoke curiosity, but don't overdo it. Your headlines should be short, punchy and to the point.
- 26. Make life easy for your audience:** In the case of written content, it's important to think beyond the headline and use 'signposts' such as headings, subheadings, abstracts, pull quotes, summary boxes, key facts boxes, bullet points, etc. to break up long copy and help draw your reader in.
- 27. Make sure your copy is up to scratch:** All the best practice copywriting tools at your disposal should be employed to help readers understand the importance and urgency of the issue, how it affects them and what action they should take. So you'll need good summaries, manageable chunks of copy and active language.

- 28. Lose the waffle:** All content, whether viewed on a desktop or a mobile, should be precision-made to suit your audience, wherever they consume it. There's still a place for lengthier content as long as sentences and paragraphs are concise, well-crafted thoughts. Tighten your copy and make every word count.
- 29. Find a good editor or ghost writer:** Your content will probably be written by a mix of people, most of whom are unlikely to be trained writers, so expert editing can make all the difference to the quality of your copy. A good editor will structure a story effectively so that it answers the relevant 'who, what, why, where, when and how' questions.

And finally...

- 30. Get the client service basics right first:** Clients can be an important part of a communications strategy, so it's important to get your service basics right first. Don't underestimate the power of a satisfied client.

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