

Solutions-style Marketing: It Can Work for You

Sharing Valuable Marketing Lessons from Today's IT Services Firms

By Leslie Vickrey, President & Founder, ClearEdge Marketing

Who isn't selling "IT this" or "IT that" these days? Global powerhouses and mom-and-pop shops. Blue chips and hipster startups. From The Wall Street Journal to the World Wide Web, everywhere you look someone has an IT service, solution or product to sell. I wouldn't be surprised if my neighborhood Girl Scout troop pitched me an IT solution along with Thin Mints this year.

Do I exaggerate? Yes. But that's how it can feel as an IT staffing firm in the marketplace today. IT is everywhere so how can you be heard? How do you stand out from the competition, not to mention solution and product providers who are also eating up all the marketing space?

The answer is solutions—or more specifically a solutions marketing approach. In recent years, the marketing strategy of businesses that provide IT solutions has become a multi-vehicle, partner-focused, dynamic approach that reaches and speaks to clients and prospects from several vantage points. Most IT staffing firms, on the other hand, have tended towards utilizing more traditional marketing tools and tactics. While IT staffing firms are often working within existing marketing spaces (Web, print, e-mail, direct mail, etc.), IT solutions firms are building new space for themselves (creating events, branded publications, market research, thought leadership, etc.). Rather than letting marketing vehicles flavor their message, many IT solutions firms are shaping marketing vehicles in order to speak more directly and compellingly to clients, prospects, partners and the public.

As an IT staffing firm, you can open up several new doors of opportunity and extend your brand reach significantly by incorporating solutions tactics into your marketing approach. In this second article of our ongoing series of marketing insights for NACCB member organizations, I will outline how your business can break through the IT commotion, not through radical new approaches but through proven practices that are working for IT solutions businesses. You will also learn the story of Harvey Nash, a global talent and solutions provider, that was able to successfully and rapidly market and brand in the U.S. using many of the techniques we are about to explore.

At this point, savvy readers will question whether taking

an IT marketing approach that is widely used can truly make an impact in an IT-saturated market? That is the beauty of the marketing tactics you are about to learn: they create a *distinguished message* and *brand* through *established industry resources* and *institutions*.

Viewed from a Different Angle

Where clients see you in the marketplace has a powerful impact on how they perceive you as a service provider. Are you an active member of the IT and business community? Are you seen as an industry expert? A thought leader? If your marketing plan is traditional in nature and consists of brochures, a Web site, some advertisements, a small amount of Web marketing and event attendance/sponsorship, it's not likely you are differentiated from many other IT staffing firms in the marketplace.

Differentiation is critical, but that does not mean you need to out shout the competition. Whether selling IT talent, solutions or products, the focus should not be on the "WOW" marketing factor. Your marketing job is not to shock or entertain. Too many businesses were burned just a few years back by dotcoms that dot-bombed despite attention-grabbing ads, hip guerilla marketing or innovative use of high-cost, high-tech media. Their demise and the loud, brash marketing approach that many took, tinted the entire IT industry. Businesses today want demonstrated experience, a successful track record and respected references from their IT providers. Across the entire sales cycle (from first contact with a prospect to ongoing account maintenance), that is what your marketing approach should communicate and that is what the following IT solutions marketing approaches accomplish.

Market Your Minds: Thought Leadership

IT solutions providers need to be known as experts in a product(s) and its entire lifecycle. To demonstrate that expertise, they have learned to do more than say they are specialists in brochures and on Web sites. They share their expertise publicly through white papers and business articles, participation in industry events and panels and research initiatives. Clients, prospects and partners read

their papers in industry journals, hear their staff speak at trade events and read about their industry know-how in the press.

In addition to adding the company's expert voices to the marketplace, these thought-leadership driven initiatives generate opportunities to be in front of prospective clients in non-sales opportunities, such as industry forums and association meetings. Market visibility is critical today, but visibility and interaction through credible mediums, like public speaking at trade events, are industry endorsements that tell prospects "this business is trusted by and partnered with resources I respect."

As an IT staffing firm, you too can easily build the same thought-leadership and partner-based tactics into your marketing plans. Thought leadership-based marketing allows you to uniquely position your business and its capabilities while also giving you tools to support every aspect of the sales cycle (prospecting, introduction, follow up, opportunity and ongoing maintenance). The first step is to identify a team of experts and specialists with valuable knowledge to share. The second step is to determine what vehicles in the marketplace best suit your team and their capabilities.

Perhaps you have a talented business leader (CEO, Sr. Recruiter, etc.) who would be an excellent speaker at industry events or able to contribute articles to industry publications? Perhaps you have consultants who are capable of producing thoughtful white papers under your organization's brand? Take inventory of your in-house skills and explore whether they can be translated into any of the thought leadership mediums defined below. And keep in mind as you review, most of these tools can be quite easily and cost-effectively developed. The most valuable component—the intellectual capital—already exists within your business, and third-party resources (editors, graphic designers, etc.) can be used to help bring articles to fruition. Understandably, your business leaders and consultants have very few hours for writing and speech preparation. Don't be shy about tapping into experienced support who can do the editing, fact checking and general administrative work that all writers (even journalists, authors, etc.) leverage.

White Papers

For a white paper, a subject matter expert (usually a highly experienced industry professional) writes an authoritative report on a product, process or solution. An example might be to have an IT consultant write a paper on testing tools and practices or to have a senior

recruiter analyze job search methods and their effectiveness at aligning candidates with opportunities. White papers tend to be longer, detailed reports that are geared to a specific group within the industry. They are typically published in trade magazines (print and online) and can also be used as speaking topics at industry events.

Industry Issue Articles

Less intensive than detailed white papers, issue articles are thoughtful pieces that explore an industry topic from a business point of view. Also targeted at trade and business publications, issue articles are not as long and the audience tends to be broader, more senior: readers need not be technical gurus or IT staffing experts to glean something valuable from the piece. This article is an example of an industry issue article that is designed to help executives in their day-to-day functions.

Speaking & Panel Opportunities

Both the IT and the staffing/recruitment industries and the associations and businesses that comprise them hold numerous national and local trade shows, seminars and meetings every year. These events are ideal opportunities for staff members to present their knowledge to the marketplace and serve as speakers or panelists. Securing a speaking opportunity can be quite easy thanks to the Internet and the calendar of events most organizations keep online. Look for upcoming events on the Web site of industry and event organizations. They often list dates for when they are accepting speaking abstracts (a short explanation of the topic). A simple e-mail, some background on the speaker and timely topic of interest can often be enough to win your business great a speaking opportunity.

Industry Events (Forums/Roundtables)

A business can host its own industry event, meeting or discussion in order to speak to a key group or share information with a targeted audience. For example, an IT staffing firm may have its recruiters host job search seminars for IT professionals. Or, a business could invite a panel of local IT leaders to discuss hiring and recruitment challenges and goals in the near future. When the topic is interesting and the information pro-

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vided worthwhile, events are a terrific way to bring partners, prospects, staff and even candidates together to learn and network under your company's banner.

Studies/surveys

This is a data gathering and analysis effort designed to share provocative facts and figures on a key topic of interest. Usually a group of professionals is polled on a determined topic. Their responses are analyzed and presented to the marketplace in order to add data-driven perspectives to issues of interest.

Studies/surveys are excellent tools throughout the sales cycle as you have numerous contact points with targets. From getting their survey input (prospecting) to sharing results (follow-up) and hosting survey-related events (ongoing maintenance), a study/survey offers numerous opportunities to connect with prospects and clients. The press is also very keen on survey/studies as they tend to be very open to publishing statistics and often need them to support other stories. As a result, studies/surveys are today one of the best methods for producing good PR.

From Channel Partnering to Skill Partnering

Becoming a channel partner for a big product vendor (Microsoft, SAP, etc.) has become required sales and marketing practice for today's IT solutions providers. Alignment with product vendors lends valuable credibility while creating a new, direct source for leads. In addition, channel partner programs are rich marketing resources in themselves. Vendors are eager to help IT solutions providers better market their product experience and expertise and thus provide ready-made tools, from presentations to slicks to networking events.

With the right effort, IT staffing firms can also take advantage of the credibility that comes with channel partnering. The truth is the businesses that are selling the vendor's product(s) (services firms) and the staffing firms who are narrowly focused on a specific technology tied to the vendor are the highest up on the channel partner food chain. They are more than likely getting the most leads and support from these partner programs. However, there are ways you can strategically nudge your firm up higher and gain more value and credibility from the partnerships.

The skills needed to work with various vendor products come with certifications and this is one place where smart channel partnering begins. A candidate pool that is highly certified is a highly credible candidate pool. Take inventory of the certifications on your IT bench and of your working consultants. It will become evident who your potential "skill partners" are. For those vendors where you have high numbers of skilled professionals on staff, on the job or on the bench, make sure that information is known. Get to know the local channel partner program managers personally in the regions you serve. Partner program managers are some of the best networked IT professionals in any marketplace. They know service providers and they know businesses in need of solutions and support.

Inform partner program managers of the skill sets within your organization so that they know your business as a top talent resource in the area. Give these well-connected professionals examples of the various projects your consultants have worked on. Your job is to educate channel partner managers so when partner businesses or potential clients within their network mention talent needs, your name is top of mind. Will it get you a premium partnership stamp for your business cards, maybe not? Are you cutting into a worthwhile business channel through indirect marketing and partner building? Absolutely.

Marketing in Action: Harvey Nash

Harvey Nash is a global, UK-based IT talent and solutions business that in just a few short years has effectively penetrated the U.S. marketplace in terms of presence and brand reach. One important factor in the company's U.S. success since bringing on Robert J. Miano, President and CEO of U.S. operations, in December 2004, has been a solutions-style marketing approach that resulted in partnerships with several established organizations and widespread dissemination of Harvey Nash thought leadership.

Surveying in Partnership

The partnering strategy began in 2005 with the Harvey Nash CIO Survey, a UK-based survey that the company had developed to monitor the goals, challenges, practices and hiring/job search practices of top IT leaders. In order to launch the survey in the U.S. and create a similar stockpile of IT industry and leadership knowledge, Harvey Nash USA needed a known and trusted name. Since Harvey Nash had only operated in the U.S. a short time, it was not well known in the larger marketplace. This lack of name recogni-

tion would make gathering responses for the survey and getting coverage of the results difficult.

The solution was PricewaterhouseCoopers, the well known and well respected consulting and business firm. A partner to Harvey Nash in the UK, PricewaterhouseCoopers agreed to sponsor the CIO survey in the U.S. marketplace, giving the survey added credibility in the eyes of the media and CIOs who were participating in the survey. For example, in only its first year of publication in the U.S. market, the Harvey Nash CIO survey garnered more than 25 national media placements in notable publications such as *CIO Magazine*, *Computerworld* and *InformationWeek*.

Market Events

In addition to sponsorship, PricewaterhouseCoopers agreed to participate in Harvey Nash USA roundtables nationwide. Informative and interactive, the roundtables were held in Harvey Nash locations nationwide and explored the IT topics and leadership issues from the survey. Harvey Nash USA also enlisted local market help, partnering with regional IT and business organizations to host each of its local market CIO survey roundtables. The association with industry leader PricewaterhouseCoopers combined with the support of local market resources allowed Harvey Nash to secure high numbers of attendees at each event and significantly increase name recognition.

The survey, along with the strategic partnerships and local market events, was and continues to be a highly effective means for communicating to the marketplace that Harvey Nash is a knowledgeable, well-connected IT industry and business resource. Leveraging the extensive success and knowledge gained from its first survey in 2005, Harvey Nash recently launched its second survey and considers the CIO survey a critical component of its marketing strategy for both staffing and solution business.

Blogs & Articles

Harvey Nash USA is also sharing its knowledge in written form. The company currently has three active blogs running on its Web site—one for its CEO, one focused on offshoring by its VP of Technology and one for its Denver market VP. This trio of blogs gives Harvey Nash an innovative and fun way to digitally share IT, staffing and business ideas with clients, candidates, partners and the press.

With several highly experienced executives and IT insiders on staff, Harvey Nash has also been able to create dozens of industry issue articles that focus on a wide range of top-

ics, from the results of the CIO survey to IT management issues and strategies. These articles, whether published in trade publications, put online or shared at events and on sales calls, are value-added marketing tools that give voice and form to Harvey Nash's expertise and experience.

The Results

These solutions-style marketing techniques employed by Harvey Nash and combined with traditional marketing efforts (creating a strong USA Web site, conducting ongoing public relations, development of collateral, etc.) have helped Harvey Nash rapidly gain significant market presence. All sales representatives across all markets are trained how to use the tools throughout the sales cycle so they are continually working to both brand the business and build the business. These days Harvey Nash leaders are often asked to speak at industry events and the CIO survey has rapidly become a cited industry resource. Rather than seeking out local and regional partners, Harvey Nash now finds associations and organizations looking to partner with it.

"Thought leadership marketing has helped us clearly demonstrate our expertise across both our staffing and solutions services, which is something clients want to see rather than read," says Harvey Nash USA President and CEO, Bob Miano. "Businesses can read a brochure that says 'we are experts.' Or, more convincingly, they can come to one of our events, hear our experts speak, read our blogs and review our surveys and articles. They can access our talent and knowledge firsthand and see for themselves how far our knowledge reaches and how strong our capabilities are."

Miano has also been able to make widespread marketing accomplishments for his nationwide network of offices due to his strategic use of outsourced resources. Rather than hiring a head-to-toes department to manage the numerous and varied marketing efforts (Web, surveys, public relations, thought leadership) of the U.S. operation, Miano chose to outsource the marketing function. "To do it all in house would be too costly and too time-consuming for what we wanted to accomplish. We would not have been able to do as much," he says. "The combination of internal thought leaders and external marketing resources has helped Harvey Nash explode into the U.S. IT services space."

Distinguish Your Message, Distinguish Your Brand

The tools to develop and deliver a unique, powerful mar-

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keting message already exist within your organization. They are the talented people who serve your clients, recruit your candidates and lead your business. Through thought leadership initiatives and smart partner programs, their knowledge and experience can bring you closer to prospects and clients.

Identify the knowledge you want to share, explore the various vehicles you can use (events, surveys, articles, PR, white papers) and then arm your sales team with tools across the sales cycle to help deliver your messages. As soon as you begin sharing the expertise your business has, you will be surprised to discover how many organizations are out there looking for the knowledge, experience, talent and capabilities your company has. ❖

Stayed tuned for our third in the series of four marketing articles from ClearEdge Marketing when next month we focus on staying top-of-mind with key decision makers with valuable content and minimal marketing investments.



About the Author

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