



AIRFOIL

Are you
talking
to me?

Bridging the “other” Digital Divide

Are you talking to me, up here on the C level? Or are you talking in geek to the information technology department? Those guys in the server room used to drive our technology growth, but now those of us without an “I” or a “T” in our titles are making the decisions on how and why we’ll use technology to address inefficient processes and competitive challenges.

A shift has occurred in how businesses talk about technology, and marketers need to accommodate that change. As recently as even five years ago, technology-solutions providers were talking almost exclusively with the CIO or IT manager in their customer organizations. Providers would detail the features, benefits, and integration aspects of their technology in three-letter acronyms to try to persuade the IT folks to adapt their network or their business processes to the provider’s product. Some bold technology marketers talked technology to the CEO or CFO, but the business executives generally didn’t understand the language of the application developers, and vice-versa. As such, they often were working from entirely different agendas.

With today’s global, nimble and niche economies, businesses don’t have the time, the resources or the desire to adapt their business processes or operations to conform to the requirements of a piece of software or the capacity of a chunk of hardware. Instead, the onus is on the tech providers — and their marketing communications staff — to identify the “pain points” of specific industry verticals and adapt their products — and their parlance — to relieve those problems.

For the solution provider these days, the other end of the mobile phone call, IM or e-mail is the CEO or CFO who is looking for an enterprise resource planning solution, or the line-of-business manager seeking a point solution for a particular problem relating to production or customer contact. Now it’s the

managers of the business, rather than the managers of the network, who are driving the demand for technology tools. They are looking for efficient and more-automated ways to improve operations, find and retain the best people, create a competitive edge, improve customer service, or accelerate product development or distribution.

The CIO likely is no longer driving the demand for technology in the organization. The CEO is doing that; and he or she speaks a different language, one focused on the ROI rather than the GUI, one where conversations turn to collaboration rather than configuration.

Technology marketers need to revise their focus and their lexicon. Instead of looking inside the technology to explain its advantages, they need to look inside the customer’s industry to identify and address the challenges and barriers there that their technology promises to help overcome.

Where does it hurt?

To reach the new decision-makers for business technology, providers must speak the language of each industry sector they approach and understand the pain points that are motivating executives to seek technology solutions. The pains in each industry may be very different from one another and very specific in their source. Those providers who are best at both adapting their products and services to address those pains and transforming their communications to match an industry’s current mindset will be those who succeed.

At the same time, executive-level decision-makers, relying extensively on their communications professionals, must be able to express these pain points in sufficient detail to give the solution provider the information needed to offer a product that truly resolves the issue at hand.

For example, in financial services, compliance requirements

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generated by state and federal regulators are mounting. Moreover, the data-security lapses that have become evident from lost computer tapes and laptops housing sensitive information threaten the well-being of financial services companies and their customers alike. Trust is the unit of commerce with the most enduring value in the financial services sector. Trust is what defines the brands that hold the reins to the money that individuals and corporations toil to accumulate. Without confidence that the firm will protect personal information and secure financial deposits, customers simply won't risk their wealth and financial futures.

Unless technology solution providers can internalize the importance of the value of trust and reflect that understanding in their conversations across the table from the financial service executive, a fundamental disconnect will defuse even the best set of products, features and benefits. Simultaneously, unless financial professionals can articulate the distinctive considerations of their security processes, the solution provider may miss the full scope of the solution required.

In automotive manufacturing, today's suppliers are focused on just-in-time production, which requires precise sequencing of seats, doors, instrument panels, front-end modules and countless components to reach the assembly line at exactly the point when a specific, customer-designated system is to be installed in a particular vehicle. Customers want to order their cars in the same way they order fast food — hold this, add that and throw in some toys. Manufacturers have spent years working on continuous improvement and creating complex networks of just-in-time suppliers and facilities, plants that constantly need to readapt, re-tool and even reinvent themselves as built-to-order vehicles become the norm.

How can technologists broadcast to manufacturers that they comprehend this challenge and, in doing so, secure their

confidence and trust in the solutions being offered? The solution provider must understand not only the intricacies of today's evolved production processes but also the future directions of the industry segment, working with marketing communicators to convey this understanding in vehicular vocabulary. Likewise, those who build cars and trucks also must build a new glossary indexed to Web services, instantaneous communications and constant technical reconfiguration. We must be able to talk to each other in actionable terms that everyone involved in the discussion understands.

The healthcare/pharmaceuticals arena presents more instances of the need to redirect our conversations. Attempts at cost-cutting and increased productivity in the face of rising prices for prescription drugs and healthcare, plus compliance issues and government demand for electronic medical records, make the healthcare sector particularly complex. The voices of consumers are becoming loud — and increasingly impolite — over the high cost of prescriptions and of healthcare in general. At the same time, concern among Americans is growing in relation to the efficacy of drug testing, as a number of FDA-approved medications subsequently are blamed for health damage and even deaths among some consumers.

How, then, can producers of pharmaceuticals engage with technologists to find places in their systems where costs can be removed while ensuring consistent quality and improving the analysis of product testing? How can producers and vendors find a common language to understand the details of the problem and the intricacies of the solution? With physicians doing computerized order entry and the IT network now required both to protect patient privacy and preserve patient records for a lifetime, solution providers are just as likely to find themselves talking to professional care givers as in-house system integrators.

Companies all across America currently are engaged in this shift in conversation. Microsoft, for example, is encouraging its technology partners to “go vertical,” urging them to specialize in particular industry verticals and, beyond that, to specialize in resolving particular pain points within those verticals. Rather than being a commodity solution provider, these partners are seeking ways to become known as a specialist in ERP for the healthcare profession, or to make their mark in meeting the distribution needs of regional suppliers within the petroleum industry.

In a 2006 report¹ on enterprise content management (ECM) software and content-enabled vertical applications, Gartner reported:

“Many ECM vendors have tailored their ECM suites to provide vertical-industry-specific and line-of-business-focused solutions. Several vendors are targeting the financial services, government, healthcare, insurance, legal, manufacturing and pharmaceutical markets. The ability to demonstrate vertical-industry expertise helps strengthen a vendor’s value proposition when seeking penetration into those verticals.”

Clearly, competitive differentiation today derives less from offering a different version of a product than from understanding the very specific challenges within vertical business sectors.

Our consumer world has evolved from a mass market to a marketplace of niches (see Airfoil’s whitepaper, *A Fractured New Universe with Thousands of Stars*, Nov. 2006). Businesses have reorganized their marketing efforts to communicate with these niches individually, and the technology provider must do the same to reach business clients niche by niche, rather than hoping that these various industries will uniformly adopt and adapt its solutions to meet their needs.

[1] Tom Eid, *Enterprise Content Management Vendors Increase Availability of CEVA Offerings*, Gartner, February 17, 2006

Crossing the divide through informed communications

If you carry marketing communications responsibility for a technology firm that is seeking industries with pains for which you can provide technological therapy, consider this range of issues to reorganize your thinking, your marketing efforts and your conversations:

1. **Do market research**, online or among industry sources, to determine which verticals might best use your product or service. Keep your mind open to industries you may have never previously considered; remember that you’re looking for common pain points rather than common business models.
2. **Gain a deep understanding of the industry and its pain points** by spending time in the prospect industry’s plants, offices and service or distribution centers. Find experts online who have written about the industry and engage them in a dialogue.
3. **Tailor the solution to the industry vertical**, rather than expecting the business to adapt its processes to your product. You must be flexible enough to tweak or reshape your product to the dimensions of the vertical’s problems.
4. **Get into the language/terminology of the industry.** Read the industry’s trade publications online, watch the terms they use when selling to their own customers, even look at nomination forms for industry-association awards that may categorize industry activities and state requirements in industry language.
5. **Consider how you package and focus your customer presentations.** Is a healthcare professional likely to be receptive to the same pitch format as an aerospace executive? Would you do better offering a video demo of a product to an entertainment executive but an electronic spreadsheet about the product’s pain-solving savings to a large accounting firm?

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6. **Retarget your media relations program** to hit the outlets that CEOs and line-of-business managers read, rather than CIOs and IT professionals. Publishing articles and ads in technology journals may reach the prospect's IT department, but developing a byline for a magazine focused on a horizontal job function or a trade publication catering to a specific vertical is likely to yield better, and more targeted, results.

7. **Rethink your choice of communications vehicles.** Which ones do CEOs use (e.g., daily newspapers, national business magazines, regional business journals), vs. CIOs (e.g., analyst conferences, user groups, tech trades)?

8. **Consider how you demonstrate the value of a product.** Offer less discussion centered on the ease of implementation or hardware compatibility and more on the end results for the business and its impact on operational efficiency.

9. **Re-identify pain points** away from those that involve the implementation or maintenance of IT systems and toward those that relate to business processes, individual employee productivity, competitors, production and distribution bottlenecks, market reach and profitability. You'll gain a more receptive audience explaining your product's value for a company engaged in globalization than focusing on development platforms, security and software deployment.

10. **Realize the need for two different messaging and communication strategies.** You must address the CEO or CFO who makes the decision based on pains. The CIO, however, still can block purchases if he feels they are incompatible with his infrastructure or inferior to competitive solutions. Your marketing effort may well require multiple bilingual discussions, one track in the language of the chief executive and another to (re)assure the IT group.

If you are responsible for communicating your vertical's needs to those who provide a technology solution, consider these

suggestions when searching for a solution provider for the pain points in question:

1. **Examine and communicate with the full competitive arena** to determine if an appropriate solution for your specific need already is available in the marketplace. An online search, counsel from a local technology association and/or counsel from an analyst firm or IT consultancy may answer that question.

2. **Be certain to select a consultant, vendor or prospective staff member who can make recommendations independent of a particular technology** brand or solution package. The individual(s) you select should find, adapt or build an architecture and platform that they will oversee from wire-frame to full-functioning product to ensure it indeed resolves the targeted pain points, rather than coming to the table with an evangelical adherence to one environment over another.

3. **Your selected technology provider must have the IT credibility** to successfully address the inevitable objections the project will receive from current IT staff. As a communicator, you will carry much of the responsibility for developing refutations of internal objections.

4. **You must communicate effectively with the technology provider's staff** to be certain they understand and address your company's precise points. Just as technologists no longer can speak only their language to the marketplace, you (and/or your colleagues) must be able to articulate your technology issues in language that is actionable by the technology consultant. Do not be concerned so much with what the solution will be or how it will be implemented. Instead, communicate the results you are seeking, such as the ability of your mobile force to access drawings from the field or avoiding duplicate entry of customer information across multiple company locations.

5. **Communicate with non-competing counterparts in your industry** — and in other industries — who may have sought and found solutions to similar pain points. A business person in a different geography, a fellow manufacturer producing systems for a different marketplace, or a service company offering different specialties may nevertheless have experienced issues very similar to your own and can provide valuable advice.

6. **Talk with your industry's trade association.** This group may serve as a sounding board and resource for many companies with similar pains and may be able to share information on solutions.

Support for converging conversations

As markets become more fractured, they develop their own dialects, and marketing becomes a constant language lesson for both business and supplier. For a decade, convergence has been the Holy Grail for technology developers. Now they are discovering that a convergence of conversation, a likeness of language, a mutual linguistic handshake is far more urgent than the convergence of handheld devices.

C-level executives will depend increasingly on their marketing and public relations staffs to serve as translators, mediators and agenda-setters in this new business environment. Staff, in turn, will seek out professionals who have one foot firmly implanted in a deep technology domain and the other nimble enough to climb a wide range of verticals, recognizing both pain points and opportunities.

Airfoil Public Relations has been particularly adept at supporting these converging conversations, helping technology organizations — like CareTech in the healthcare industry, Sircon in insurance, NextEnergy in alternative-fuels development and Syneron in medical technology — communicate their offerings

in a manner that addresses the precise needs of their targeted markets. Likewise, Airfoil has helped a multitude of clients seeking solutions in defining their needs and presenting their pain points to providers.

“Airfoil’s success has derived largely from our ability to operate intensively and creatively in both the bailiwick of the technology provider and the boardroom of the vertical-industry executive,” observed Airfoil President Janet Tyler. “Midsize companies in both arenas are confronting a formidable marketplace, and they trust Airfoil’s Higher Thinking to lead them through the communications process with intelligence, acquired from experience.”

To learn how Airfoil applies Higher Thinking™ to the new marketplace, visit www.airfoilpr.com, contact us at info@airfoilpr.com, or phone us at 866-AIRFOIL.

Resources

To find information on pain points in various industries, examine:

- The Information Week 500 industry breakdown at www.informationweek.com
- Industry analyst firms for your specific sector
- U.S. Small Business Administration
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce
- Regional economic development councils

For advice on how to reshape your conversations with customers or technology providers, contact Airfoil Public Relations at info@airfoilpr.com.

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Higher Thinking: The view is different from here.

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