Selling Ourselves: Upstream and Downstream

Some recent Internet discussions have focused on a perennial topic: How do we sell our services? The question is posed not only by individual consultants but by government and corporate staff members as well. Many usability professionals work within internal services groups that must continually justify their existence to corporate executives and, in some cases, demonstrate that they can be profit centers. In this fiscally cautious era, everyone in our profession needs to be not only a consummate expert in usability and user experience issues, but at times, an effective sales person as well.

Alas, many of us are far removed from front-line marketing and sales. Some of us even try to distance ourselves, hiding out in the back rooms of engineering, research, administration, etc., not wanting to get our hands, mouths, feet, or minds dirty. Well, as one who has seen what it takes from many perspectives, I can assure you that marketing our services effectively is a key component of getting our job done. It may seem a tainted task to some of us, but it is essential. So, where to turn for assistance?

UPA chapters have addressed the topic from time to time; check with your local chapter. There are also a number of resources, which I've posted online (http://upassoc.org/usability_resources/usability_in_the_real_world/selling_usability/index.html). A recent debate between Eric Schaeffer of Human Factors International and Jared Spool of User Interface Engineering highlighted the discrepancy between how some of us market ourselves as engineers (clear processes and standards) but sometimes actually perform more as artistic designers with personal, idiosyncratic techniques and behavior. How can or should we describe the right persona and set of procedures for ourselves—or should we have several sets ready, depending on the circumstances?

Your company's size and complexity may radically alter your approach to selling your services up to management or down to those in the trenches. Some of us work in design teams big and small; others of us work single-handedly to market, sell, carry out, and document. Some of us may have to rely on advertising; others may survive quite well, thank you, on word-of-mouth referrals based on direct experience of our deliverables. Whether we work as individuals or as part of a work team or larger enterprise, we all would do well to take a moment to think about how we present and sell ourselves.

Some national publications that educate general and business audiences are beginning to assist us. The fact that *Business Week* has an annual design review of new products is a start. Unfortunately, their focus on primarily physical product design and the sometime vagueness of what "user experience" might encompass demonstrates that more could be done. The technology columnists of *the New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Financial Times*, among others, focus more on usability and user experience design issues. They pave the way for explaining ourselves to laypeople, as well as future business clients. Do our parents understand what we do? That may be the ultimate test of our successful story selling.

We can learn by looking at the websites, publications, portfolios, and practices of our most successful and/or admired peers, and then ask ourselves what lessons we can derive and apply to our own situations. In addition, published resources and organizations abound to help us. *UX* magazine has focused from the start on the practicing professional. Explicit or implicit in its articles are the case studies, terminology, principles, and philosophy that can help you describe what you do and convince others to buy your services.

Bias and Mayhews' publication, *Cost Justifying Usability: An Update for The Internet Age*, recently published in its second edition, provides evidence valued by prospective clients. A master analyst is Robert Cialdini, and his work, *Influence: Science and Practice*, in its fourth edition, is available, as well as some of his principles of influence at http://www.answers.com/topic/robert-cialdini. Take a look and try some of them out.

For more than twenty years, I've been advising usability and user-interface design groups within corporations, with only a little tongue in cheek, that one of the first things they needed to do is print up t-shirts or hats to announce their existence to their own troopes. The first group of people to convince of your vital importance is your own team. Of course, intranets now help tremendously, but they alone can't do all of the job. Putting on seminars, evaluations, even fairs, may be helpful. One recent project of my own firm was helping a major corporation's user-interface design center figure out how to explain its own process, terminology, and projects better to internal as well as external clients. We can all use a little help, even the largest corporations with many resources upon which to draw.

Fortunately, help *is* available. The first step is recognizing that you need it! Isn't that what we are trying to tell our own prospective clients? So, the art and science of selling others begins with selling ourselves on the idea that we may need to shift paradigms, behave and speak differently, and explain things in better (not necessarily dumber) ways.

Ready to start?

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