

Do Unique Selling (or Buying) Propositions really matter?

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If you have been involved in any marketing or selling activities before, you might have heard the term “Unique Selling Proposition (USP)”. Most likely, you are exposed to the millions of advertising examples or slogans everyday around you, such as “You Get Younger Looking Skin” (from OLAY), “Everyday Low Price” (from WalMart), “When your package absolutely, positively has to get there overnight” (from Fedex). Even for a city like Hong Kong, you will have “Asia’s World City” (<http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/>) as the USP for tourism, business and investment.

We have to go back to the early 1940s when the term USP was invented by Rosser Reeves (1910 – 1984), an American of Ted Bates & Company. He believed that USP’s were what products needed to be perceived better than their competitors’ and thus be bought.

Are Unique Selling Propositions really effective though? Do Unique Selling Propositions really matter?

Probably not, because if they did, then how come we have SK-II, Carrefour, DHL, and Singapore out there that are still in business, doing well and also attract millions of people around the world to balm their skin, shop for bargain, send their packages, and to take pictures with the Merlion (the lion head with a fish body resting on a crest of waves: the icon of Singapore)? Uniqueness does not equate to effectiveness.

In this day of age when information is so easily accessible, the so-called “uniqueness” of your city, company, products and services are very vulnerable. Features can be imitated and cloned; even your entire service team can be moved to your competitor; and advertising can be so powerful that you will

simply lose out in the battle of the conquest of customers' mind. More seriously, do you think that the customers that MATTER the MOST, believe everything you say?

Even if they are truly unique, the fundamental problem with most USPs is that they have been developed with a view from a seller's own products, service, performance and company. You can be as unique and different as you want, but if it means absolutely NOTHING to the target audience, then why would they care?

One day, your buyer might want to have a pair of high-technology tennis shoes to defend her company's tennis queen title, the other day she might want an elegant high-heel to match her gorgeous night gown on her Valentine's date. Well, your Unique Selling Proposition (everyday low price) will be difficult to match with what she is looking for.

The point is: for your USP to be effective with your prospect, it must first be RELEVANT to THEM! Otherwise, the "U" in your USP will only stand for "Useless". In order to be sure what you are offering is relevant (to THEM), you must start looking from the other side: the side which matters the most, the side that makes the ultimate buying decision. Yes, it is THEM who matter.

While "Selling Propositions" are hard to become unique at any time, "Buying Propositions" on the other hand, can be quite unique. That is the good news.

The bad news is: even the customers themselves are not sure what their Unique Buying Criteria are, let alone you. It even becomes worse when they might have one criterion one day and a different one the other.

Fortunately, among the endless buying motivators, there are the big 4 out of which at least one is involved in any (!) buying decision according to research conducted in the 1990s (often it's a combination of motivators that make the difference).

They are:

- Need for Recognition;
- Gain Instinct;
- Security Instinct; and
- Convenience Instinct

We can start by using coaching style questioning to reveal each one of them. Bear in mind that no customer is the same, even the same customer may be more motivated by the Need for Recognition today and Security tomorrow. Hence, it is your job, as a sales person, marketing executive or senior manager, to discover the key buying motivators of your buyer - the obvious ones, and those that are hidden but equally important, then to prioritize them, do your best to match them with your offer. Remember, features alone are not going to work; it is the benefit that matches with their buying motivator that clicks. The important thing is that your customers do recognize, concur and endorse the benefits that really matter to them, i.e. those that match their buying motivation. ... and doing it again when necessary each time, just in case they have changed their mind.

Psychological research tells us that the most attractive and easily recognized word to a person is the sound of their own name. Use that principle in your search for their motivators. Then, instead of showing how great you are, it becomes about what your prospect secretly hopes what you can do for them –

matching their motivators with your Unique Buying Proposition (UBP).

Do Unique BUYING Propositions really matter? You can bet your life they do – because they match the buying motivators of your buyer – those that really MATTER the most.

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William is a senior veteran in the business world, also helped to attract and confirm investors to set up overseas companies; and was involved in a few merger and acquisitions throughout his career. He earned his stripes through his practical experience in the actual market.

He is keen to help and coach companies to explore their own potential, understand their core competence, and ride through the adversity of the economy. He is especially interested in situation where companies have to deal with constant changes, new market developments, multicultural environments, fierce competitions, and leadership development, particularly in sales. His expertise lies in building and managing sales and marketing teams, key account management, tactical negotiation and closing deals, forming alliances and partnerships through training and coaching within the organization to develop a sales- and subsequently results-oriented culture.