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Today's topic is **customer focus**, something nearly everyone claims to be, but few are.

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Google "customer focus" and you'll get more than 15 million hits. People repeatedly use the term, but few practice customer focus in their proposals, sales presentations, or sales documents. Today's podcast will describe some personal research on customer focus, and then suggest eight customer focus guidelines that you can use to assess and improve your documents and presentations.



CUSTOMER FOCUS RESEARCH

What make one document more customer focused than another document? Do individuals perceive customer focus differently? Do individuals with different cultural backgrounds, different training, or different work experience perceive customer focus differently?

Before I answer those questions, I need to define style versus tone in a document. Style refers to the choices that the writer makes. Tone is the impact on the reader. Style choices include word choice, sentence structure and length, organization, graphics, and the page and document design. Customer focus is an element of tone; it's the impact of your style choices on the reader. So we are really asking: What style choices should I make as a writer or speaker, to give my document or presentation a customer-focused tone?

To determine what prompts readers to see one document as being customer focused, I asked individuals to rank the customer focus of five documents. The base document was a two-page executive summary for a sales proposal. For each of the five documents, the appearance and content were the same while the organization and the writing varied. In other words, the objective of the experiment was to determine what style choices affected the perceived customer focus of a document.

To date, more than 2000 individuals from 26 different countries have ranked the customer focus of these five documents. The results have been consistent across cultures:

- 1st** 70% ranked the same document as most customer focused
- 2nd** 70% ranked the same document as least customer focused
- 3rd** The composite ordinal ranking was consistent across groups and cultures
- 4th** Most participants could cite only one or two aspects of the writing to support their ranking

In other words, they had little idea why they ranked one document as more customer focused than another. Yet eight items were manipulated across the five documents. In short, the majority of the individuals had the same perception of customer focus, but they didn't know why.

IMPROVE THE CUSTOMER FOCUS OF YOUR PROPOSALS

Toby Keith had a major hit with the song, *I Wanna Talk About Me*. Millions of listeners related to that experience.

Prospects care about the needs of their organization and themselves; prospects don't really care about your needs. However, if you don't meet their needs, then you're unlikely to meet your own needs.

So, just like dating advice, here are eight style choices that you can make in your documents to improve your perceived customer focus and win more business. Use these same guidelines to evaluate your current documents, and, you can use them with some minor adaptation to evaluate your presentations. For several of the guidelines, I'll give some contrasting examples relating to Bubba's Bar B Q, the hypothetical business that was used in the first Proposal Guide podcast. These guidelines apply equally well to sales presentation and sales documents.

Let's start with the easy ones:

- Guideline 1** **Name the prospect before you name yourself, or your organization.**
 Scan the paragraphs of your proposal. How many of the paragraphs begin with the name of your organization, we, or our?
 Listen to this seller-focused example:
Green Field's lawn service crew will mow the lawn weekly at Bubba's Bar B Q
 Now the customer focused example:
The grass at Bubba's Bar B Q will be mowed weekly by Green Fields' crew
 The wording in the second example is customer focused, but it's passive voice and lacks a benefit. I'll give you an improved version after a couple more guidelines.
- Guideline 2** **Name the prospect more often that you name yourself.** Do a word count. Count the personal pronouns. Seek a prospect-to-seller ratio of one-to-one or higher. That's pretty straight forward, so I won't give an example.
- Guideline 3** **Cite benefits before features.** Both are important, but prospects care more about benefits than features. In a business document for readers with limited time, place the most important content to the reader first.
 Now, let's improve that earlier customer-focused example:
To present an attractive public appearance to Bubba's Bar B Q customers, Green Field's lawn service crew will mow your grass weekly
 Note, the benefit is cited first, the prospect (Bubba's) is named first, and the prospect-to-seller ratio is 2-to-1.

Guideline 4 **Cite the prospect’s vision.** If you haven’t made the effort to understand what they are about, why should they trust you to help them achieve their vision? I’ve had several people say, “Why tell them what they already know? And, what if I get it wrong? The point isn’t to inform the prospect; the point is to demonstrate your understanding without making the lame claim, We understand your needs, (trust us). If you get it wrong, you deserve to lose their business.

Guideline 5 **Link the prospect’s vision to the immediate purchase.** This creates the pull; it helps the buyer justify going ahead with this purchase, versus other purchases, or postponing a decision.

Now, let’s extend our example. Bubba himself has said that his vision is to franchise Bubba’s; he wants to go national. Here’s an example:

Bubba said in our meeting last week that he wanted to be wildly successful at this location and then franchise nationally. Immaculate grounds around this original Bubba’s Bar B Q are an essential element to both attract new diners and keep them coming back.

Note that the vision is stated in the first sentence. The second sentence links this lawn service purchase to Bubba’s vision.

Guideline 6 **Cite the prospect’s hot button issues.** Hot button issues are an amalgam of issues, needs, requirements, and evaluation criteria. State hot button issues in either the order cited by the prospect or in order of importance to the prospect, most important ones first.

Guideline 7 **Make ownership of the hot button issues explicit.** Cite your source, preferably a person or document from the prospect’s organization.

Here are examples of the last two guidelines. Note how the first example could appear arrogant.

The ideal lawn service must meet three requirements:

- *Consistent, quality service*
- *Reliable, courteous crews*
- *Reasonable cost*

Now note the different tone in the revised statement:

In Bubba’s bid request, you said that the ideal lawn service must meet three requirements:

- *Consistent, quality service*
- *Reliable, courteous crews*
- *Reasonable cost*

The first statement borders on arrogance, because the seller seems to be telling Bubba what is important, how to evaluate the bidders. In the second statement, Bubba owns the requirements.

Guideline 8 **Address each hot button issue in the order listed.** You have announced the order of your document. Follow it. In exact order. Make subheadings identical, word-for-word. The implication is that if you don't keep your word in your own document, then why should the prospect trust you to keep your word if given the contract?

Link major features of your solution to at least one of the hot button issues. If you can't, then they probably don't need that feature.

I don't think that this guideline needs an example, and we're out of time.

So here's the *bad news* and the *good news*.

The *bad news* is that customer focus, seemingly a simple concept, is difficult to communicate. Saying that you are customer focused doesn't make it so.

The *good news* is—if you learn to follow these eight guidelines, you will gain a significant competitive edge. You'll win more competitive opportunities, forge stronger customer relationships, and be more successful.

So let's review. **Customer focus** in a document is the result of the style choices made by the writer. Customer focus in a presentation is the result of similar word and organization choices, but you add body language, appearance, vocalization, timing, room set-up, and the visual aids.

So, for one more time, here are the guidelines:

1. Name the prospect before yourself
2. Name the prospect more often than yourself
3. Cite benefits before features
4. Cite the prospect's vision
5. Link the prospect's vision to this purchase
6. Cite the prospect's hot button issues
7. Make ownership of those hot button issues explicit
8. Discuss each hot button issue in the order listed

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That's all. Thanks for listening.

REFERENCES

Note: The Customer Focus Calculator gets at guideline #2. Tom Sant discusses understanding the prospect's underlying needs. Nancy Stephens discusses how individual sales professionals can adopt a customer-focused approach.

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