

Unique Selling Proposition Planner

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Introduction

To achieve success, a growing small business must tell potential buyers what sets its products and services apart, what makes it distinct. Potential buyers are bombarded by hundreds of marketing messages each day from traditional media such as TV, radio, magazines, billboards and bus stop signs. They are hit even more by messages pouring in from newer communications channels such as e-mail, websites, and social media.

The number of marketing words and images in this onslaught varies according to the researcher. Consumer Reports estimates 247 messages per day, while the Union of Concerned Scientists puts the figure at 3,000. Regardless of the number, national and international advertisers invest \$620 billion every year to capture your attention.

No matter how large or small the audience of a small business is, the messages must survive and somehow be heard amidst all the media clutter. In the one or two seconds the typical viewer or listener allows for a first impression, you must make a clear and memorable impression—or you make no impression at all.

If you succeed in winning attention, then the clock begins ticking, and the audience's attention is continually being drawn to other subjects. Your message must be quick, clear and distinct. It must make a proposition that is unique and compelling.

The purpose of this planner is to help you develop a unique selling proposition (USP). A selling proposition states features and benefits attractive enough to a specific market to elicit attention and,

ultimately, a purchase decision. Uniqueness allows your message to be perceived and remembered amidst the glut of competing messages.

Marketing Planning Steps

Important marketing planning steps are required for you to develop a successful USP. These include:

1. **Defining your target market.** There are a lot of people who might buy your products and services. But you must narrow down your focus to the group most likely to buy. This narrowing is done in terms of demographics. You don't have to be scientific. Use your best guess.
2. **Identifying the features and benefits** that your target market values the most.
3. **Stating** your features and benefits in **words and images appealing to your target market.**
4. **Determining the image** you want your company to portray. Image includes the values and passion you wish to communicate.
5. **Distilling these words and images into a key graphic and key phrase.** The key graphic, ideally, is your logo, and the key phrase is the words appearing under the logo and in other prominent visual and audio locations. Some people call the key phrase a slogan. The key graphic and key phrase are **not** your USP, however; *all of the outcomes* from these planning steps are your unique selling proposition. The key image and key phrase create a first impression sufficiently attractive to gain enough attention for the rest of the USP to be perceived.

Worksheets

At the end of this planner you will find blank worksheets that you may print and use to develop your USP. These blank sheets include:

1. Target Market Worksheet
2. Features and Benefits Worksheet
3. Image Worksheet

There is no worksheet for the key graphic and key phrase, as the inspiration for these will arise as you do the other work

Case Study

There is no better way to understand business abstractions than to witness an actual example of another company wrestling with the same things you're wrestling with. The following business case relates an actual example of a business working to achieve a world-class Unique Selling Proposition. The names and locations have been changed.

Richard Esparza and his children run a ready-mix cement manufacturing and delivery company in Commerce City, California. Richard's father had immigrated from Mexico to start the company, and when Richard took over, he renamed the company American Redi-Mix, seeking to break any ties to Mexico and appear the same as any other American small business.

While Richard's heart was in the right place, appearing the same as everyone else was a bad idea. To make things worse, cement is very difficult product to differentiate. To the untrained eye, it all looks the same. And even to the trained thinking of a project manager at a general contractor, there were indeed vast differences in the quality of ready-mix cement, but a lot of vendors were available in Southern California to provide the product. So all of the companies really appeared the same to these contractors.

When Richard was confronted with the need to differentiate his product, to make it stand out in some way, he said, "Our service really makes us different." But the problem was that most small businesses say the same thing. If every provider of ready-mix cement claimed their service was better, then no distinctions would be available in the mind of a buyer.

Richard had to face the fact that he was unable to change the truth of the matter—he and his father had built their business on providing excellent customer service. Richard realized that if prospects could

understand specific information about his service, then they would realize that the service of American Redi-Mix truly was better.

To focus his mind better on these ideas, Richard called his staff together after work one day. He asked his three outside salespeople, his operations manager and his two dispatchers. He pulled them into his office. Richard had unrolled a set of prints on an old job they had bid, peeled off one of the giant sheets, flipped it over to show the blank side, and taped it up on the wall.

When everyone was quiet, Richard told everybody that he was concerned that whenever he and everyone else talked about American Redi-Mix, they had a “Me too” attitude, meaning that they talked like they were just like all of the other ready mix companies.

“Our not having our marketing figured out is costing us money,” Richard told them. That got everyone’s attention.

Richard knew he could get the group talking if they first focused on what they knew best. He wrote the words “Our Features” at the top left of the sheet. As you can see below, he was right. Everyone had a lot to say. Richard made notes on the sheet as people talked.

Then Richard realized that an internal point of view would not go very far convincing somebody to buy their product. He said, “Good job, everybody. But this is all about how we think. So how do all of our customers think?” He wrote “Benefits to YOU the Customer” at the top of the right side of the sheet.

You can see what they came up with:

Features and Benefits Worksheet

Our Features	Benefits to YOU the Customer
We honor short lead times on small jobs. Two hours before you need it is ok.	<i>Two hours lead time, up to 50 sq. yrd. Put your labor to work exactly when you need, and save costs.</i>
We collaborate on long-range planning, to make sure they always have the quantities and the grades needed.	<i>Planned quantities ready in any quantity, exactly by slump, air entrainment, compression and permeability requirements</i>
We have the skills to consult with you to solve field problems	<i>All products ASTM C 1077 certifiable. Use our expertise to speed through expected delays</i>
We're OSHA certified Certification # xxxxxxxx	<i>Our materials and delivery processes meet all contract safety requirements</i>
All decision makers are local	<i>You can get quicker response to problems and questions. Just call us.</i>
We're a family business with family values. Dad, daughter and two sons—we're are all here working	<i>We're a family business. You can feel like a part of the family, too</i>
We give you personal attention- We're great communicators	<i>You can count on us to listen to your most detailed requirements and give you</i>

	<i>advice you need to succeed.</i>
We offer the same great service regardless of size- 4 yards is the same as 400	<i>If you're small, we don't overlook you - If you're big, we don't take you for granted</i>

During the discussion, one of the salespeople started talking about taking some of the words on the wall and putting them in bids to help buyers understand the company better. The second sales guy said, "Yeah, I like that. Plus I'm going to start introducing our company differently to PMs who don't already know us. This could help me get in the door."

It dawned on them, *Yes, it was all about service, but now they had a lot of specific things to say about their service, rather than just saying, "We have great service."*

Richard realized that the American Redi-Mix website looked pretty much like his competitors' sites. But now he had some specific things to say on the site. Plus he realized that he could get different customers to give him testimonials about the great service they received. He knew the letters would just back up a lot of the words in the right column. He decided to call up his IT company, to get them to redo the web site. He even began designing a new brochure in his head.

But with all of these new thoughts, Richard started to feel confused again. When he considered handing out these new brochures, he pictured whom he'd give them to—his target audience. Something didn't seem right.

He looked at the words on the wall. The last point was that they were just as glad to serve a homeowner laying his own patio as a large general contractor building a new runway for the Naval Air Station in San Diego. It was true. They really like making sales—any kind of sales.

But some of their sales could actually be holding them back. He new they had to do some more thinking.

Continuing to lead the discussion, Richard said to Luis, his oldest sales guy. “Hey man, here’s Joe Blow homeowner in Chino Hills, and he wants us to quote the concrete for his new barbeque area. An here’s Jim Blow project manager, and he’s handing you the prints for a new shopping center in Chino Hills. What job do you want to quote first?”

Luis was quick to point out that they really didn’t make much money from homeowners, given the overhead of using partially filled trucks to carry loads all over Southern California. It dawned on everybody they would continue to serve homeowners, but that their real target audience was large general contractors. Luis said, “I’d sell to Joe Blow just to fill the driving schedule at the end of the week. But I’d want to build my week around all of the Jim Blows.”

Richard thought his years of experience had taught him how to talk to the Jim Blows, the large GCs, but he realized that his team had to be on the same page—they needed to understand their target audience pretty well, so they could choose their words best. Richard peeled off another blueprint page, flipped it, and taped it to the wall. He filled in the left side, and waited for their ideas about the right side.

Target Market Worksheet

Gender (Male, Female, Both?)	Male, almost always. Someday this may change, but not yet
Age (Lower limit – Upper limit?)	27 to 50
Role (job function?)	Project Managers, occasionally estimators serving jointly as PMs

Education (Less than high school, high school, college degree, graduate degree?)	High School + school of hard knocks
Annual Income (Lower limit – Upper limit?)	\$50,000 - \$90,000
Geography	Los Angeles basin east though Inland Empire (stops at Riverside)
Other traits	These people are really busy
Other traits	Some PM's understand 50% of what they should know about concrete engineering
Other traits	

After the team had worked on the above answers, Richard put a few things together in his head for the first time. *These PMs make a lot of money to have so little understanding about concrete!*

That understanding prompted him to say, “You know, what you guys have just proven is that these project managers really depend on us for their careers. Look at how much money some of them make. Look at the fact that almost none of them have a degree in construction management, much less engineering. We don’t have degrees either, but look at how much we know! Still, these guys are leading multi-million dollar projects that have to pass engineering standards. What does that tell you about American-Redi Mix?” Richard waited for the question to sink in.

“We don’t make enough money!” Luis said. Everyone laughed.

“No, really,” Luis continued, “They depend on us to give them the right mix, with the right chemicals, the right water content, at the right flow, to meet the specs of their work. If we don’t, their parking garage collapses. All that time we spend going over their drawings before we propose the job really pays off...at least for them.”

“Well,” Richard said, “It really can pay off for us. I think we need to be a lot more confident about some of our bids. I mean, I think we could quote some of the jobs higher, because our service is worth it!” That comment make the salespeople feel pretty good, because they earned a commission based on the gross profit of their deals.

With that, Richard taped another sheet to the wall.

“Now it’s time for us to work on our image. This company has a self-image, and it’s based on the self-image of all of us in this room. I don’t think we see ourselves the way we should.

Richard led the team, and they put up these words:

Image Worksheet

<p>How do we see ourselves right now?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A bunch of working guys, trying to make a living -We're mainly Mexicans selling to a lot of white guys -It doesn't matter what anyone looks like. We work really hard. -We want to make a lot of money!
<p>How do satisfied customers see us?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We're the experts -We save their rear ends! -They have a problem, and we pull them out of the fire. -We keep the inspectors away
<p>How do our strengths compare to our competition?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We keep PMs safe from evil inspectors -Our PM's have less red tags when they use us. -We're cheaper. (Richard marked out that comment; it wasn't a strength at all) -Competitors think they are big shots compared to us, but they're not.

Richard realized everyone had worked pretty hard today, and it was time to go home. He sent them out with a challenge.

“Tomorrow after work, I want you all right back here. 6:00 sharp.” He heard the groans. “I want you to think about how our logo should look. I don’t like what we have now. I want it to look like what we’re realizing about image.”

“So what are we saying our new image is?” asked Antonio, one of the dispatchers.

“That’s what I want you to decide,” Richard replied. “Also, you know how business put kind of a catch phrase under their logo, you know, a slogan? Well I want you to come with just a few words that tell about our new image. I want us to answer the phone with those words. I want the words on everybody’s cards. I want to put the words at the top of our web site. I’m going to make a new sign out front. I’m going to put the new logo and these words on all of our trucks.”

“You got to wash them first.” Everybody laughed. It was Edmundo, the other dispatcher. He didn’t speak a lot of English. Richard had a rule that they always use English in the office. So Edmund never said much.

In spite of the giggles, Richard knew everybody would take his challenge seriously.

The next day, Richard noticed that his top people seemed different. They somehow appeared more sure of themselves. He couldn’t wait for the end of the day.

When 6:00 came, Richard had the blank paper up on the wall. He waited for someone to start.

There were a lot of words. But everybody in the room was saying that they were all really good at their work, but just hadn’t realized it. Most of the comments were about the fact that everybody’s self-image got

said, in one way or another, to their customers and prospects. Everybody realized they had better change their words, a lot.

Then Luis said something great. "I think we're worried about being Mexicans. But, you know, I was born here. You were born here. All of us were born here. Yeah, that's not true of some of our drivers. But look. We're just as American as anyone else we sell to. Just like our company name. We're American.

Just then Richard realized something big. "So what should our logo look like?" The idea came to everybody at the same time. *It should look like the US flag! Everybody loves the flag!*

Next Richard got them to talk about the key phrase to go under the logo. Everybody spoke about how their service was really sold, while the competitors said words about service, but didn't back them up. Everybody kept talking about the substance of their own service, how really solid it was...how it was permanent, how it never went away, even after the sale.



Then it dawned on one of them, and he blurted it out:

"Service that is Concrete."

The room became quiet. It was Edmundo. He spoke English less well than anyone, but he had come up with it. Everybody agreed: That was it!

Features and Benefits Worksheet

Our Features	Benefits to YOU the Customer

Target Market Worksheet

Gender (Male, Female, Both?)	
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Annual Income (Lower limit – Upper limit?)	
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Image Worksheet

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