

What Makes You Different?

Differentiating yourself can be difficult, but it's worth the work.

By Max T. Russell

Shana is executive director of an organization I'll call Let's Live Now. When I ask what her nonprofit does, the answer rolls right off her tongue:

"We inspire people in the lower half of our state to take better care of themselves through convenient exercise and nutritious foods, especially locally grown."

I remark that her description sounds similar to other initiatives. She frowns a bit as she says, "Well, I can't speak for other groups, but we actually do what I said."

I'm suspicious, because people like Shana often have a special motivation for their involvement with an organization. That motivation is what sets the organization apart.

Yet I didn't hear anything personal in what she told me. At her request, we continue our conversation.

Me: "Why did you start Let's Live Now?"

Shana: "I watched my grandfather, my uncle, and my father get older, become inactive, get fat, and have heart attacks or strokes. My grandmother, my aunt, and my mom tried their best to get these good men to take better care of themselves. I went to college for training to turn this kind of situation around."

Me: "I've read a lot of your marketing materials, and I didn't see anything about what you just told me."

Shana: "I guess I've always figured the main thing is to tell people how to take care of themselves and make the information as accessible as possible – not focus on myself."

Me: "The story you told me is what powered you through college and all kinds of graduate-level seminars. It would probably make an impression on others. Have you tried it on your client base or supporters?"

Shana: "I do somewhat, when I speak to groups sometimes."

Shana's situation is common. Some directors know exactly how to say what makes their organization different, while others have never stopped to spell it out in their own heads.

“Why wouldn't all directors want to do the work of differentiation?”



It can be difficult to identify your own special motivation. Once you draw it out into the open, a smart second step is to translate that information into communication materials that depict the true origin of the organization and what makes it unique to its clientele.

That step is seldom taken, because most directors don't have a strategy for it. In fact, many people blindly entrust their identity and prosperity to word-of-mouth advertising.

Shana doesn't want to be one of them. She realizes her organization needs to retool before it can fulfill its goals. All the communications of Let's Live Now can be remade to reflect (1) the stories behind the organization's birth and purpose, (2) an emphasis on men's health, and (3) how families can help their men live healthier lives.

That's an upgrade that will turn heads. That's how Shana can differentiate herself as a leader. Why wouldn't all directors want to do the work of differentiation? It's the best starting point for making messages clear as a bell. **S**



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