

The Meaning Behind Mission

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Leadership

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People talk a lot about purpose these days, espousing the purpose-driven path, career or project. Many companies and organizations craft a mission statement because they think they should. But many don't actually live by it.

When we create marketing plans for clients, we start with the client's mission statement at the very top of the plan to remind us to direct all marketing efforts toward the mission. Keeping the "why" at the forefront of our efforts helps to align marketing tactics and activities with the meaning behind the organization's existence.

In the 1950s and 1960s, companies by and large were not guided by mission statements. In 1974, management consultant and author Peter Drucker advised executives "to define the purpose and mission of their businesses as a kind of strategic imperative." Mission statements became a more common corporate occurrence in the 1980s, inspired by a desire to define their reason for being.

Many people now believe that mission is essential for business because it infuses a sense of purpose into the people who make the business real. Why do we show up for work every day? Why do we choose this type of work over something else? What are we hoping to accomplish?

When we can answer these questions, we often find a renewed zeal for the work we do. When we can't, aimlessness can lead to restlessness, which often leads to a desire to quit and move on — a pattern that can perpetuate itself until the person stumbles upon a personal mission

to direct their work.

Early in my marketing career, I worked with a nonprofit that paid its employees unbelievably small amounts due to the restrictive coffers of the organization. Still, people stayed for years in their roles, despite meager pay increases and bone-thin benefits.

I once asked a program manager why she stayed on. She responded, “The mission.” She believed so wholly in the work of the organization that it didn’t matter what she was paid. She showed up for work every day enlightened and energized by the purpose behind what they did. It was enough to satisfy her. We should all be so lucky.

Mission is one of the key statements we work on with clients when creating what I call the foundational narrative. One of the biggest mistakes a company can make is not clearly articulating who they are, what they do and why.

When we build a foundational narrative, I begin by asking about their origin story. What inspired the company’s creation? What from that early inspiration lives on today? How has the path evolved? In short, why do they do what they do, how do they do it differently from anyone else and why should someone patronize the business? These “why” questions are crucial for articulating with clear focus what differentiates one company from another.

The word “mission” itself means “an important assignment carried out for political, religious, or commercial purposes” or a “vocation or calling.” Those may be heavy notions to associate with commerce. But we are living in an era of purpose and meaning, a time when many in the Western world seek a depth to their work that we can only demand when we live in a time and place of privilege.

Many businesses espouse meaningful tag lines to draw customers. Many employees drink the proverbial Kool-Aid, accepting low pay for purposeful work. It is not too much to demand a reason behind our work.

Simply put, mission matters. It is the north star for your work, the guiding light for your organization. Before delving into any other marketing activity, make sure you have clarity on why you exist and what you hope to accomplish.

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