

## **Strengthening Your Competitive Edge**

### **Part 1: Being Selected**

**Dorothy I. Riddle**

We live in a global economy. Even if we see the Coast as our market, off-Coast firms can win away our customers. And our best opportunities for growth may be off-Coast. So how do we make sure that we are providing our customers with the best possible service to keep them loyal, and how do we attract new business?

There are three stages of a customer's experience that we need to manage if we want to be competitive – selecting a service provider, receiving the service, and evaluating the service once it is completed. Here are some tips and questions to help you increase your competitiveness in that first stage of being selected.

#### **Becoming Known**

Since services typically are purchased before they are received or experienced, customers look for ways to manage the risk of selecting a new service provider. Think about your own approach. How would you select a new provider, especially if the quality of the service you received mattered to you? Most likely you would ask others for referrals. So one of your company's strategic imperatives is to network enough that, when someone asks for a referral, your name pops up. This involves not only making initial contacts with other firms but also staying in touch and referring others to them.

#### **Being Presented Accurately**

Customers now search online for service providers. In fact, in some places hard-copy directories no longer exist! So do you know where your company is listed online? How often do you "google" your own company to check the accuracy of those listings? Many of us only look to see how our company name ranks online without thinking about accuracy. But you may be surprised one day to discover that a new online directory has been developed, listing your company ... with out-of-date information.

Another factor to consider regarding online listings is where a prospective customer will look for verification that your firm is credible. Are there industry or association directories in which you should be listed? What about municipal or regional directories?

#### **Having a Quality Website**

In today's world often the first experience that a prospective customer has of your company is your website. In fact, people use websites as proxies of what your service will be like. Think about what you do and don't like in business websites that you access. Then think about the following in regard to your corporate website:

- Is it easy to find your website through online search?

- How quickly does the website load initially? How quickly do subsequent pages load?
- How easy is it to find key information on your website without clicking through lots of pages?
- Is the content easy to read, with plenty of “white space”?
- Are there examples of your service, or testimonials about your service?

### **Having a Worldclass Business Card**

Next to your website, your most important marketing tool is your business card. It is what others will keep to remember you by and, again, it represents the quality of your service to a potential customer. Take out your business card and look at it as if you were seeing it for the first time:

- What impression does it make on you? Does it look professional and like quality matters to you?
- Is the address information clear and complete, including country to show that you are a global player?
- Does it have your e-mail address and website so that you seem accessible?
- Is there a tagline or some way for the person to remember what you do?

### **Ensuring Continued Selection**

Remember that your current customers are influenced by the above factors, too. If it is hard for them to locate your contact information or if your website is not user-friendly, they may turn to a competitor. So keep monitoring how professional and accessible you appear to customers. It will pay off!