

How to Market Yourself – Part One

By **Ron McGowan**

If you ask employment seekers what their biggest challenge is, most of them will tell you it is marketing themselves. They either hate it or are very uncomfortable with it. This is a major problem because their success is directly tied to how effective they are at marketing themselves. The good news is that marketing can be learned.

The main reason for their discomfort with marketing is ignorance. They don't understand it and assume that since they don't have a background in it, they won't be effective at it. The challenge is to unload their current perceptions about what marketing is and to accept the fact that, with hard work and being prepared to move out of their comfort zone, they can become effective at it.

The myth of the backslapping, loud, aggressive sales type is just that, a myth. Successful salespeople are professionals who are well trained, attend to the needs of their customers and are genuinely interested in helping them. They sell solutions to problems and products and services that satisfy a genuine need. They're also resilient. They've fallen flat on their face in front of customers many times before becoming successful. And they've endured a lot of rejection and bounced back from it. Some of the most successful salespeople are quiet, unassuming people – not quite the stereotype often attached to salespeople. The main reason why they're successful is that they're sincere. Their customers pick up on that because sincerity can't be faked. The common view of what selling is about is pure bunk. The "gift of the gab" is not an asset – it's a liability. There's no such thing as a born salesman or saleswoman. Successful sales people achieved their success through working hard, believing in the product or service they sell, knowing it inside out, knowing how it can benefit potential customers and by not being easily discouraged. These are characteristics that you must acquire. If you have any lingering thoughts that you're not good at selling yourself, you need to get rid of them. Your selling challenge is to communicate to a potential employer or client how they can benefit from using the skills and experience you have to offer. Not in a fancy, forced or insincere way but in the way of having a normal conversation with them. If you are a low-key individual, be assured that many successful sales people are like that too. The last thing a potential employer or client wants from you is a sales pitch. The primary reason employment seekers fail at selling is lack of preparation, or failing to do their homework before getting in front of an employer or client. To succeed, you need to be absolutely clear about the following questions:

1. **What do you have to sell?**
2. **Where are you going to sell it?**
3. **How are you going to sell it?**

What do you have to sell?

Most employment seekers are weak in this area. They've never taken the time to thoroughly analyze themselves and the skills they have to offer. It's no longer sufficient to identify yourself as an engineer, accountant, MBA, graphic designer, or whatever. You need to be very clear about the skills you have to offer, and more importantly, why a potential employer or client would be interested in them. How will hiring you make their lives easier? What problems and challenges do they have that you can help them with?

As you begin to analyze your education, experience and the skills you've acquired, play devils' advocate with yourself. Put yourself in the shoes of the employer or client you want to work with and take a "so what?" attitude towards your skills and experience and be prepared to respond to that attitude if they project it.

The key to success is to know as much about their business as you can and to be absolutely convinced that your skills and experience will help them. If you are convinced of this and have thoroughly analyzed their business, they will pick up on that. Most people don't do this. They often assume that their skills and experience speak for themselves. They don't. It's your responsibility to explain to the employer or client how they can benefit from hiring you. They're not interested in how many people you managed in the past, or how big the budget was for the department you managed. If you have a lot of experience and your background includes operating at a senior level, you need to be careful about how you come across, especially if you're dealing with a small organization. If you're not careful you might unwittingly scare them off. Your challenge is to assure the business owner or manager you're dealing with that you will support them and can offer solutions to the problems and challenges they face.

If you stay focused on the key question that is always on the back of the mind of employers or clients, i.e. "How will hiring this person make my life easier?" you will have your share of success. If you can demonstrate to the employer or client that you've done your homework and know their business, they'll be impressed. And be prepared for them to test you. If you are an accountant, for example, they may give you their most recent financial statements and ask you to point out areas where they can improve. If you are a professional, you won't be intimidated by this. Just be careful that in your eagerness to impress them, you don't give your expertise away. The trick is to demonstrate that you are a professional and can help them with the challenges and problems they have.

How to Market Yourself – Part Two

In Part One you defined exactly what skills and experience you have to offer employers or clients and why they would be interested in them. Like a salesperson who is being trained on a new product or service, you should now know your product (i.e. you) inside out. The next step is:

Where are you going to sell it?

As part of analyzing the skills and experience you've picked up in the past you may have identified some characteristics of the companies where you've had success. Or you may have identified certain types of projects that you really enjoyed working on. If not, go back over Part One and look for the types of companies you've worked for and projects you've worked on that you really enjoyed and that brought out the best in you. Then look for similar companies or projects where you can duplicate this success.

Employment seekers sometimes overlook this. They get so focused on finding their next gig that they don't pay enough attention to finding opportunities that are a good fit for them. You also want to be looking for opportunities where you can build on the experience and success you've had. For example, if you did a project for a legal firm that was successful and that you enjoyed, why wouldn't you try to build on that experience and success by marketing yourself to other legal firms?

Most commentators on the workplace will tell you that at least 80 per cent of the employment opportunities are never advertised. This is why so many people who are looking for work are struggling. They approach finding work in essentially the same way as their parents did. They scour the mainstream media and popular Internet job sites and when they can't find work, they give up or settle for low paying service jobs. They simply don't know how to tap into those hidden employment opportunities.

You need to take your connectivity to what is going on in the economy and in your field to a much higher level than the average person. You need to become a news hound and sniff out those hidden opportunities. You can test yourself on how well you are doing this by your reaction to news about your field that appears in the mainstream media. If it is news to you, you're not as connected as you need to be.

You should already be aware of it through the database of news sites and other sources that you monitor regularly. Talk to successful employment seekers and you will find that they are very well informed about what is going on in the economy and in their field. Market research is one of those areas, like getting regular exercise and eating sensibly and so on that everybody agrees is important. Talk to those who are struggling in today's workplace and you will consistently see that they approach market research passively or simply don't understand how important it is. They've probably heard that most employment opportunities are hidden but they have no idea about how to find them.

Can you identify the fastest growing sectors in the region that you want to work in? What are the key trends in the areas you want to work in? Can you identify some significant projects that are underway or will soon be started that might provide employment opportunities for you? Are you right on top of what is going on in your field? What skills are most in demand in your field? Do you have them? If not, how can you acquire them? If you were asked to take on the "program chair" position for the professional association that you belong to, how easy would it be for you to identify topics that you know would be of interest to the members as you put together the program for the year?

Name the best media sources; web sites, blogs, newsletters, journals, etc, for keeping you connected to what is going on in your field. How creatively and diligently do you monitor these sources? Which companies have recently landed significant contracts that might provide an opportunity for you? Can you identify some key players in your field who have recently been promoted or taken on new assignments? Could your skills and experience be of interest to them?

Recruiters, headhunters and H/R managers are increasingly turning to the Internet to fill jobs or find staff for projects, which is one of the reasons why many employment opportunities are never advertised. How easy would it be for these people to find you on the Internet? Have you ever thought about what a search on the Internet would reveal about you? Do you realize that it's becoming common practice for managers and business owners to do an Internet search on candidates as part of the hiring/screening process?

Are you doing any Cybernetworking? Do you know about web sites like LinkedIn, Visible Path, Zoodango, ZoomInfo, Ryze and Xing? Have you ever used these sites? Do you know that employers are increasingly using them to find candidates? Which blogs do you subscribe to? Have you thought about creating your own blog? Are you aware that recruiters often monitor blogs that are related to the field they're searching for to find experts? They find candidates by looking for postings from people who obviously have the background they're looking for and who communicate well.

Finally, a potential byproduct of being well informed about what is going on in the economy and in your field is that you may spot unmet needs. Maybe you can create your own work opportunity by going directly to an employer with an idea whose time has come.

How to Market Yourself – Part Three

Now that you know exactly what you have to sell to employers or clients and where you are going to sell it, we come to the final step in the process:

How are you going to sell it?

The sales cycle consists of two parts: marketing and selling. So before we go any further, let's make sure that you understand the difference between them (most people don't.) First of all, marketing precedes selling. It refers to a wide range of activities that have as their objective getting the attention of potential buyers of a product or service. These activities can be anything from a sophisticated, expensive television commercial or infomercial to someone walking around a busy shopping area with a sandwich board strapped to them that is promoting a product or service. Selling is what happens when you get the attention of a prospective buyer and they call you, walk into your store or visit your web site.

Many employment seekers don't understand this and it is the main reason for their lack of success in selling themselves. No professional sales organization is going to let a sales representative get in front of a customer until they have proven that they know the product or service they're selling inside out and how it can benefit customers. Employment seekers tend to jump straight into selling before they're ready to sell, and when that doesn't work assume that they're not salespeople and never will be.

You need to spend the majority of your time in the marketing phase and only when you have mastered that can you begin the selling phase. To succeed in selling, you must first succeed in marketing. Parts One and Two were all about marketing and most of this section is about marketing. You're not ready to sell yourself until you've done all the work required in these sections. Your success in selling yourself will be directly related to how hard you work at the marketing phase, how creative you are, and how willing you are to move out of your comfort zone. As you go through the marketing phase, your self-confidence and eagerness to sell yourself will steadily rise.

You are going to be pleasantly surprised at how successful you can be at selling yourself now that you know how the process works.

Most employment seekers today use one marketing tool: a traditional resume or CV. It still has a place, if you're applying for a job, but it's the wrong tool for marketing

yourself to employers or clients when you're approaching them on speculation that they might benefit from the skills and experience you have to offer. Today's tools can include a visume, a two-and-a-half-minute visual resume, a marketing letter, blog, web site, brochure and variations on the traditional resume or CV, which are marketing oriented. The generic, one-size-fits-all resume or CV, or any other such tool is a dinosaur.

You need to tweak your marketing tools to address the needs of the employer or client you're targeting. You must clearly indicate that you know something about them and imply that the experience and skills you have to offer will benefit them. You must indicate in your marketing tool that you will promptly follow up with them and make sure you do that. Some employment seekers are reluctant to follow up and that is a major mistake. According to a February 2006 survey by Robert Half International, 86 per cent of Canadian executives said that employment seekers should follow up within a week of submitting an application.

There's probably no other word that is used more frequently in relation to today's workplace and that is more abused, misunderstood and overused than "networking." That's unfortunate, because if you understand what networking is really all about and you're prepared to invest the time it takes to put an effective networking strategy together, it is probably the most powerful tool you can use to market yourself and find hidden work opportunities.

You first need to be clear about your motives for networking. Successful networkers are givers, not takers. If you only contact people when you need help, you're not a networker, you're a sponge. Successful networkers give generously of their time and expertise to their profession and their community. You will find them serving on the executive and committees of the professional associations they belong to and on the board of at least one non-profit or charitable association in their community.

Many so-called networking events are a waste of time. They attract employment seekers, recruiters who are looking for commission salespeople, personal coaches and the like. If an event is being marketed as a networking event, you probably should avoid it. It is highly unlikely that the people you need to connect with will be there. You need to determine what activities such as seminars, courses, trade shows and conferences are coming up in the next few months where the people you want to connect with are likely to attend and sign up for them.

You need to be patient and not expect immediate results from the networking events that you attend. If you're on the executive or committees of the professional associations you belong to, if you are on the board of at least one non-profit or charitable association in your community and your motive for networking is not self-serving, you will have your share of success. Write some articles for the journals or newsletters of the professional associations you belong to, volunteer as a speaker at events where people can benefit from your expertise, or start up a new association or special interest group in your area and you will be on the radar screens of the people you need to connect with.

Ron McGowan has helped thousands of college/university grads and experienced people to find work for over ten years. His book "How to Find Work in the 21st Century" <http://www.trafford.com/00-0131> is currently in use at over 200 colleges, universities and secondary schools.