

TLC needed to promote tech products

I recently talked with Rae Weil, owner of Richland-based Kobalt Marketing, about the ins and outs of marketing for tech-based businesses. Not surprisingly, a lot of tender loving care is needed to promote complex products.

"The challenge is identifying and reaching the business' target audience," Weil said. "It's often a smaller audience than you would go after for a nontechnical product. And in many cases the audience or customer base doesn't yet know that they need the technology you're promoting, so the marketing really takes a three-pronged approach."

The three prongs are:

- ▶ Telling the story of the need for the product.
- ▶ Describing the benefits that will result from the product.
- ▶ Explaining what the product is.

In storytelling, the marketer must understand the need that the product will fulfill. In particular, it's important for the technology developer and marketer to talk about the different applications

for the product.

Armed with this knowledge, the marketer can research where and how to reach potential buyers. Then the marketer can uncover a need for the product and develop a story about how it will fulfill the need.

As the story is woven, marketers need to highlight why someone should buy or use a particular product. That is, what will they get out of it? Provide an answer to the "So what?" question. Will it improve treatments for certain diseases? Will it bring about world peace?

The third prong, describing a technical product, isn't easy. In many cases, descriptions for marketing products need to be written so technical and nontechnical people can understand them. In the end, a marketing expert may have to produce twice the amount of materials for a given tech-based product or business.

I see this often at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory because of the complexity of our research. Staffers develop brochures that describe a given technology for a general audience, but they also develop technical posters that researchers use at scientific conferences and in meetings with clients.

However, there's more, Weil says, as the three-pronged approach doesn't make up an entire marketing plan.

"Third-party verification of your business or product is so important — particularly in tech-based markets," she said. "To get this verification, though, you need to build relationships within the industry you're targeting. There's nothing more powerful than being able to use someone else's good reputation to help sell your product."

One example Weil gave was from her work with a company on the East Coast. Her client's technology improved cement mixtures. Once a well-known, respected developer sang the technology's praises, it received huge returns on its marketing investment because of the third-party endorsement.

Other examples of third-party verification are mentions of businesses or technologies at technical conferences, in publications, or endorsements from renowned professors or writers.

The moral of this TLC marketing story is to seek help early when promoting your tech-based business or product. Just as starting a business or conducting research takes time and expertise, so does marketing.

For more information about Rae, go to www.kobaltmarketing.com.

▶ *Andrea Turner works with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at 509-375-3893.*



**Andrea
Turner**

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