



## Thirty Ways to apply the ‘Seven Ps of Marketing’ to the voluntary and community sector

As demand for services and competition for resources climb ever higher, effective marketing is becoming increasingly imperative for voluntary and community sector organisations, but many find it very difficult to apply hard profit-related business marketing tools to the voluntary and community sector. Instead, they struggle constantly with the idea of marketing their mission and the necessity of shoehorning their services into the concept of ‘product’.

In creating an effective strategic marketing plan, any organisation needs to address a number of key issues – well known in marketing circles as the ‘Seven Ps of Marketing’. This factsheet offers an adaptation of the ‘Seven Ps of Marketing’ tool for use in the voluntary and community sector.

### **Product**

#### **1: ‘Product’ and evidence of need**

For the majority of voluntary and community sector organisations, ‘Product’ is the service or services they provide that reflect their underpinning values, although it may also be intellectual property, goods or simply an idea. But the ability to define your ‘Product’ is not enough in the voluntary and community sector, where it is also vital when you want to apply for funding that you have clear evidence of the need for your product.

#### **2: Juggling different customers for the same product**

VCS organisations differ from most commercial businesses in that their product is likely to have more than one customer or consumer for the same ‘sale’ of a product. For instance, there are the funders/commissioners who pay for the provision of the product as well as the beneficiaries/service-users who consume the product. Then there are volunteers who while helping to provide the product also consume the volunteering opportunity attached to it, as well as any other stakeholders who have legitimacy and power in the buying and selling process such as your trustees, the Charity Commission and/or benchmark providers. That’s a lot of balls to keep in the air.

### **3: Beware competing market forces**

Beneficiaries often have little or no choice in the product they consume and yet demand (and deserve) a high quality service, while the funders/commissioners are the ones with the buying power and yet offer increasingly less for the products they fund or procure.

Voluntary and community provider therefore increasingly find themselves squeezed tight by the competing forces of the market place until it becomes more and more attractive, and often necessary, to develop products that can go direct to the market: products that the beneficiaries themselves will be prepared to pay for or that the organisation can develop new target markets for.

## **Price**

### **4: Actual price versus true cost**

The price of a product supplied by the voluntary sector to a beneficiary may be zero to that beneficiary, but the true cost to the organisation of supplying it is certainly not zero, and so it is vital that the actual price quoted to funders/commissioners accurately reflects this true cost of supplying the service. This is what will drive your fundraising requirements.

### **5: Perceived value versus true cost**

A product is worth only as much as customers are prepared to pay for it and this depends on the 'perceived value', which may have little to do with the true cost of delivering the product and more to do with the emotional benefits the customer can see in its features. This becomes particularly significant for the voluntary sector since their product needs to elicit an emotional response from diverse customers. For instance, for a commissioner looking at several broadly similar bids for the provision of a product, the perceived value that will make yours stand out is likely to involve the lowest cost per intervention, whereas the beneficiary's emotions will be triggered by the satisfaction he feels from the service he receives as well as by what he knows about the ethos of your organisation.

### **6: The importance of 'Brand'**

That means that the importance of strong branding to voluntary and community sector organisations cannot be overstated since a customer bases his/her process of valuing a product not on its technical or scientific merits, which are often expressed in complicated jargon, but rather on the emotions triggered by a subjective "vortex of images and ideas" that make up a brand platform. You then need to make sure that your 'brand integrity' is maintained. Don't say one thing in your marketing messages and then do another in delivery.

### **7: The dangers of labelling a service 'FREE'**

Many voluntary and community sector organisations fail to recognise the danger that 'free of charge' may equate to 'worthless' in the minds of customers (whichever target market they are from). Even if a product is provided free of charge, you can enhance its perceived value by ensuring its true value is recognised. So it is imperative that you fully understand what price your product would bring in a commercial market (including an element of

profit) even if you are offering it free or subsidised, and find a way of conveying that in your marketing.

### **8: Don't apologise for charging**

If a VCS organisation is in the position of needing or wanting to charge for services, they should never apologise for it. To do so is to give the customer the impression that the product is not worth the money that is being charged.

## **Promotion**

### **9: Be clear who you're promoting to**

Having a wonderful product means nothing unless the benefits can be clearly communicated to target markets. You need to be clear who your target markets are and pitch your communications in the most effective way for each one. Are you 'selling' direct to the beneficiary (similar to traditional Business to Consumer marketing - B2C), or are you selling to other VCS organisations or to funders/commissioners (similar to Business to Business marketing - B2B)?

### **10: What they base their buying decisions on**

In commercial business, B2C marketing is aimed at consumers who make decisions based not only on price but on popularity, status, and other emotional triggers, whereas in the voluntary and community sector it usually (but not always) relies very little on price and is often more about the philosophy and ethos of the organisation rather than the product itself. On the other hand, B2B buyers in commercial business make decisions primarily on price and profit potential whereas in the VCS they're not so much concerned with profit as with money saving, and emotional triggers count much more than in the world of business commerce.

### **11: Don't confuse your message**

It's a mistake to try to target everyone at one time because your message will be confusing and will end up reaching no-one. For the majority of voluntary and community organisations, the cost of promotional activities is paramount – even if there is a budget – so don't waste money by trying to make your marketing campaign the be all and end all for everyone.

### **12: Make sure you deliver**

As well as being concise and to the point, being consistent so that they resonate easier, and focusing on the wants of the customer and what's in it for them, above all your marketing messages must deliver on promises. If you can't deliver on the promises you've made in your marketing, your reputation will become tarnished very quickly and no amount of positive marketing will make a difference. News of bad service travels fast.

## **Place**

### **14: 'Place' for the voluntary sector**

'Place' is about having a presence in all of the best positions to influence your target markets. In marketing terms, it means anywhere an organisation comes into contact with its target markets. For the VCS, 'place' is everywhere your organisation has a presence, for instance on the high street, your website, on social media, in memberships of networks, in the referral lists of partner organisations, in the press, at events, in promotional materials etc.

### **15: It's about accessibility**

There is no point occupying a prime site in a business park if your target markets can't get there, and don't forget that the cost of accessing your organisation and its products needs to be low cost or free for the beneficiary and reasonable for businesses, so do take the availability and cost of public transport as well as local car parking charges etc. into account too. But equally for voluntary organisations, accessibility is about providing marketing material in the most appropriate formats and languages for your target markets.

### **16: Hearts and minds**

'Place' is also about knowing where your target markets have a presence. For instance, it's no good being active on Facebook if your target markets all prefer Twitter. You need to know what places your target markets occupy and could come into contact with your brand and products. These places are where you need to be to have the best chance of your marketing messages entering the hearts and minds of your target markets.

## **People**

### **17: People buy people, not products**

A voluntary organisation's 'people' can create a powerful effect during product/service delivery since they are one of the few elements of a brand that customers and other stakeholders can see and interact with.

### **18: Your people are part of your brand**

Your people need to be aware that they are individual spokespersons for your brand and can influence success positively or negatively based on their words and their actions – and this includes your volunteers. They therefore need a clear understanding of and commitment to the mission of your organisation.

### **19: They need to know their stuff**

Your people need to fully understand the benefits and features not just of the organisation and the brand, but also of the individual products and services so they are able to describe them accurately and succinctly. For volunteers, it's okay for them to have that detailed

understanding only of the part of the organisation they are involved in so long as they also have a good overview of the rest and know who to refer enquiries to.

### **20: The 'elevator pitch'**

The term 'elevator pitch' reflects the idea that it should be possible to deliver a summary in the time it takes for an elevator ride – approximately thirty seconds to two minutes. It's a great idea to have your pitches worked out in advance of the launch of a service and extremely important that your people are familiar with them – there's nothing worse for an interested customer than to have his enquiry about the merits of your new service met with a confused waffling reply.

### **21: The right people over the right skills**

It is critical to any organisation's image and success, but especially VCS organisations, that their people not only have the skills necessary to do the job, but that they are the right people with the right commitment and qualities to 'own' the organisational vision and guiding values that make up your brand platform. These qualities are perhaps more important within the voluntary and community sector than existing skills since you can train the right person up in the skills necessary for the job much easier than you can alter the qualities that make up that person.

### **22: Other people vital to your success**

For the voluntary sector, 'People' can also refer to the relationships your organisation needs to form and the networks you need to build to get your products to the beneficiary and/or to be in the best position to influence funders/commissioners. Do your people have access to the appropriate networks for effective relationship-forming? Do they fully understand your brand, products and services so they can promote them effectively?

## **Process**

### **23: Clear underpinning processes**

This element of the marketing mix is about how the service is delivered and how success is measured. All services need to be underpinned by clearly defined and efficient processes to avoid confusion and to promote a consistent service, as well as to produce evidence that allows you to monitor your performance against KPIs. This includes your marketing activities; they too need clearly defined processes so you can keep track of what works best.

### **24: Make sure everyone knows**

'Process' means that everyone knows what to do and how to do it. There's no point in lovingly creating a wonderfully artistic process map if it stays in your project/contract file and your people are unaware of it. And don't forget to make these processes part of your

induction package so new people are able to get on with the job effectively as soon as they're in post. A smoothly running project can create its own positive marketing.

### **25: Don't blind your customers with science**

Customers are not interested in what your processes are, only that they work. The moment you start talking about how efficient you've made the internal workings of your project, you've lost them. They simply need to know what's in it for them – how your product or service will satisfy their particular need in the most efficient way possible.

### **26: Fit for purpose**

Many voluntary organisations still follow processes that were developed years ago and may no longer be fit for purpose in a fast-changing digital landscape. Processes need to be regularly reviewed to ensure you continue to work in the best way to reach your target markets.

## **Physical Evidence**

### **27: It's not just about monitoring**

In marketing terms, 'Physical Evidence' is not only about showing you've achieved your objectives. A service is usually intangible in that it can't be seen by a customer before it is delivered, but you can reduce a customer's perceived risk of taking up your service by providing evidence of previous satisfied customers through telling stories and displaying images. Think about how you can turn your data into attractive and informative visual representations of the effectiveness of our products/services, but don't forget the importance of gathering the relevant consents to be able to use this data for marketing purposes?

### **28: More than one customer**

Remember what we've already talked about in other sections above; in the voluntary and community sector you're likely to have more than one customer, so for voluntary organisations this aspect of the marketing mix is about providing evidence to **ALL customers** that they can trust and have confidence in your organisation by reflecting your ethos and brand in everything that you do. Don't neglect your beneficiaries in favour of providing physical evidence to your funders/commissioners, or vice versa.

### **29: Environmental factors**

'Physical Evidence' can also mean environment – for instance your reception area or office – where your customer comes into contact with your organisation. It can include factors such as furnishings, colour, layout and noise level and you can improve your customers' impressions of your organisation and brand a great deal simply by improving the physical environment. Ask yourself what the customer sees when accessing our buildings / offices /

services. Is this a true reflection of the organisation's ethos and brand, and does it portray an appropriate level of professionalism?

### **30: Branded goods**

Offering physical evidence such as customised marketing materials, e.g. a branded calendar or pen, to your customers can be a valuable tangible reminder of your brand or service. For many voluntary organisations though it can be difficult to find funds to do this so it is vital that a realistic marketing budget is included in your funding bids. You also need to think carefully about which tangible reminders would be most appropriate for our target markets.

So now we've gone through the Seven Ps of Marketing and it is time to get started with creating your strategic marketing plan. The seven steps explained in this factsheet will give you a framework to work through and will help you answer key questions and improve your messaging so you can market your organisation effectively.

NCVO's KnowHowNonprofit web pages have a wealth of [further information on marketing and communication in the voluntary and community sector](#).

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