

People Skills: Marketing OR/MS—A People Problem

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This is another in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), a discipline that offers much to the OR/MS practitioner determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of ambiguous people-related issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions.

Key words: organizational behavior; modern marketing.

John D. C. Little, past president of the Operations Research Society of America (ORSA), The Institute of Management Sciences (TIMS), and INFORMS, once said to a graduate class at the MIT Sloan School of Management, “People support what they help to create.” This nugget of unconventional wisdom is excellent change-management advice. I applied it repeatedly during my career in management science spanning several decades, and found that it greatly facilitated the implementation of many OR/MS projects.

As I read Gene Woolsey’s recent *Interfaces* column (Woolsey 2006) about providing what the client wants, not what *you* want, I remembered Dr. Little’s sage advice and its the simplicity and focus on people. Embedded in the midst of the other informative and well-written articles, which focused on a variety of complex optimization and simulation applications, Woolsey’s warning to keep the client’s needs foremost was both timely and compelling, particularly as we wrestle with how to promote the benefits of OR/MS more effectively to prospective customers.

In a classic article, Theodore Levitt (1960/2004) wrote that to market correctly you have to know what business you are in. Modern marketing theory (Kotler 1999, p. 12) holds that, in contrast to the product-driven days of old when you could get a model-T Ford in any color you wanted as long as it was black, modern marketers must focus on the needs of their customers.

Together, these two pieces of marketing wisdom suggest (1) that we must decide who our customers are before we can figure out how to market to them, and (2) that when we do figure out who they are, we need to meet their needs, not ours.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume that the users of OR/MS services fall into two distinct categories, advanced users (A) and basic users (B). Let us further assume that our users fall into one of two distributions. In scenario 1, 80 percent are A and 20 percent are B. In scenario 2, the reverse is true.

If you accept the two marketing premises described above, you can understand why it is vitally important to decide if scenario 1 (mostly advanced users) describes our customers (i.e., the users of OR/MS services), or if scenario 2 (mostly basic users) is a better description.

If we judge by the type of article typically published in *Interfaces*, the answer is scenario 1. (Understanding *Interfaces* articles requires a fairly high level of OR/MS knowledge.) If this is true, we may be able to use more product-focused marketing and an expert delivery system for our services. Said differently, it may be okay to try to “sell” users on the virtues of our services by using colorful marketing brochures, case studies of successful applications, and copies of prize-winning research articles, much like automobile manufacturers appealing to sophisticated buyers.

However, if we want to pass “the managerial test” of the vast majority of basic users, like the fellow in Woolsey (2006), and the “inclusion test” of Dr. Little,

we will need to take a different approach, one that (1) engages users actively in the process of meeting their needs, (2) enlists their aid in the marketing of OR/MS to their colleagues, and (3) engages these new customers actively in the process of meeting their needs with OR/MS services.

If we choose this alternative route, we can still use our professional marketing materials and application success stories to complement the primary thrust of our customer-focused marketing efforts. However, we will be relying more on “showing” people what we can do for them rather than “telling” or “selling” them on it. Furthermore, we will be asking them to tell their friends about us, if they like what they

see. In so doing, we will become modern, consumer-focused marketers using the best practices of successful OR/MS scholar practitioners (like John Little and Gene Woolsey) and marketing gurus (like Philip Kotler) to meet the needs of our customers.

References

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