

# Defining client's inner purpose is focus, strength of agency's unconventional integrated brand communications counseling

**Mike Niederquell grimaces when he recalls the potential client that ran away, its executives overwhelmed by his penetrating questions about the company's purpose and focus.**

"Come back in a year," they told him. "We're not ready for you."

Unfortunately, Niederquell can't charge for epiphanies.

Those companies braced to answer Niederquell's tough questions end up focusing 180 degrees from where they thought they would—inward—before Niederquell ever allows them to talk to the market. He puts the top executives and board of directors through a series of deceptively simple "branding exercises" designed to force their attention back on why they got into business in the first place, on the company's driving passion.

This isn't, of course, what they come to Niederquell's marketing and PR agency asking him to do. They ask for help marketing a product, getting elusive publicity or creating a kick-but-

advertising campaign they are convinced they need to get customers knocking down their doors.

What they want and what they need are two different things, he says, but few companies know the difference at the beginning of the conversation. Discovering their passion is not on the agenda and not in the budget.

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Niederquell's own self-definition has changed during his 30-year career, the last decade as president and CEO of his own company, The Quell Group. He's part executive coach, part management consultant, part PR man, part marketer, part best friend. Struggling to define his own company's purpose and passion, he's used up a list of buzz words: diagnostics-driven marketing, brand doctors, creating successful dialogues, innovative marketing solutions.

Now he's adopted what he calls "Quell Mantras," with a deliberately different flavor: ***Divine thy true purpose. Align with thy purpose. Market to thy purpose. Let thy purpose be a compass and a beacon.***

Niederquell jokingly calls what he does the "Zen of Marketing." It's different enough to get jaded executives—wary of the latest business management trend—to pay attention. Humor helps the medicine go down.

Like the executives he counsels, he's read every business and management book out there. He knows the concepts, can recite the jargon of the day. He's talked to enough CEOs to see the same pattern emerge again and again.

"Companies have to get back to basics and figure out what is the one thing they are passionate about, the one thing they do well," Niederquell says. "Most of them don't have a clue; they don't know who they are, what they have or where they are headed. I asked a client what they sell, and the answer was, 'We sell data.' No, you don't sell data; you sell the ability

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to make better business decisions.”

Three decades in PR, marketing and advertising have honed his ability to get to the point, fast. Niederquell listened recently as a top manager complained about the dozen company committees she sat on in addition to her grueling workload — including personally planning the company’s annual picnic.

“You guys are tangled up in your own underwear,” he interrupted. She nodded.

Using the “cocktail napkin” explanation of what Quell does — an exercise he requires of clients — Niederquell sums up his agency’s niche in three words: Unknot. Align. Market.

That means untangling companies knotted up in their own underwear, sorting out who is pulling against whom because of differing goals, unclear expectations, fuzzy lines of communication and undefined accountability.

“Once we help ‘divine thy true purpose,’ we align all the key elements in the company,” Niederquell says. “That means the board of directors, the executives, managers and employees.

Once we know the company inside out, understand the passion, we use our communications expertise to determine the best tools to take them to market. That may include PR, marketing, advertising, direct mail, online and digital—or it may not,” he says.

The end result: a marketing plan that is aligned with the business plan with a consistent focus inside and outside the company.

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“You go deeper than anyone else,” observed the vice president of a key client. “You take a holistic approach that no one else takes.”

In Niederquell’s mind, typical PR and marketing shops are hung up on selling services, forcing clients into a standardized template of marketing, PR and advertising services. Sure, his shop offers the same long lists of expertise and services, but he regards them as tools to be pulled out as needed.

The most important part, counseling companies on how to get out of their own way and untangle themselves, is typically an afterthought lumped under the “counseling” category. Niederquell’s goal is to build his company’s intellectual capital to counsel clients and manage integrated communication service.

In early 2005, Quell launched an eye-catching new logo and look that zeroes in on the unknotting and aligning approach.

“I tell clients when I walk in the door, ‘I have nothing to sell,’ he explains. “Instead, I ask questions. Lots and lots of questions. Pretty soon, they are intrigued and want to know more.”

How does he feel now about the one that got away? He shrugs. Like a good marketer, he turned the problem into a catchy tagline:

***“Epiphanies. No extra charge.”***

