



Those in the finance function may not be natural marketers of their own value to the organisation. But they can – and should – learn, as **David Parmenter** explains.\*

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Finance teams, and those within them, can never do enough marketing. Lack of marketing is the main reason many of them are not appreciated fully by management and why finance team implementations often take longer and are less successful than anticipated.

Yet the necessary marketing doesn't usually come naturally: if accountants were good marketers, many may well have chosen a different career path. So how can finance functions – and the individuals within them – market themselves better?

#### **An active marketing programme**

It is important that those in finance recognise these shortcomings and commence an active marketing programme that puts the finance team in the spotlight. As a starter I would recommend the following:

- learn how to sell change;
- network within your organisation;
- give recognition more freely;
- have a cluster of mentors to support you;

# PUTTING THE FINANCE FUNCTION – AND YOURSELF – ON THE MAP

- contribute to your organisation's intranet and newsletter;
- celebrate more;
- be great on your feet;
- learn to see the wood for the trees; and
- look a million dollars.

Below, I deal with each of these in turn.

## Learn how to sell change

It is through your audience's emotional drivers, rather than logic, that something is sold. This has been the pitfall of many an accountant's selling pitch.

All major projects need a public relations (PR) machine behind them. No presentation, email, memo, or paper related to a major change should go out unless it has been vetted by a PR expert. Even if you are an SME consider if you can afford an hour or two with a local PR expert who may prove as important as your organisation's lawyer. Or at least involve a PR savvy colleague. They will doubtless rewrite most of

your content, so do not get offended. Instead, observe their genius and claim all the credit when the sale process works – just as everybody else does!

Avoid writing long reports, as nothing was ever changed by a report; it is the sales presentation and follow-up action that make the change. Thus all your 'selling change' presentations on major projects should be road-tested in front of the PR expert. Your PR strategy should include selling to staff, budget holders, the senior management team (SMT) and the board.

You need to radically alter the way you pitch a sale to the SMT and the board. It should go as follows:

1. make sure you have a good proposal with a sound focus on the emotional drivers that matter to your audience;
2. focus on selling to the thought leader on the SMT and board before presenting the proposal. This may take months of informal meetings, sending copies of appropriate articles, telling 'better practice' stories, and so on, to awaken interest. (It is worth noting here that the thought leaders of the SMT

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- and board may not necessarily be, respectively, the CEO and chairperson); and
3. having presold the change to the thought leader and then made the presentation, sit back and watch how the attendees turn to listen to the thought leader's speech of support.

Your proposal now has the best possible chance of a positive vote.

### Network within your organisation

Only a fool believes that achievements speak for themselves – finance needs to walk about more. Encourage all of the team to spend more time on proactive visits. Spend time adding value to the senior management team by increasing their understanding of the business. Ways of doing this include:

- use morning or afternoon break times for networking with budget holders and other stakeholders. (You should count working through a coffee break as a lost opportunity rather than a badge of honour);
- make the revenue forecasting process a good way to learn about what your major customers need from your organisation. A good place to start is interviewing your top five customers and assessing their demand for the next year;
- invite new staff from major subsidiaries or departments to call in when they are next in the head office;
- consider running events where the finance team organises a coffee break to raise funds for a local charity, with budget holders donating a pound or so to enjoy some hospitality in the finance offices. You will win points just by organising such an event; and
- ensure that you talk positively to others. Popular people are seldom known for their negative thoughts – so learn to keep yours private.

Finally, no matter how much pressure you are under, remember to smile every time someone comes to your desk.

### Give recognition more freely

I have long been aware of the significance of recognition, but only recently did I realise that it is a fundamental foundation stone to all our relationships. The ability to appreciate and recognise all those we come into contact with defines us as a person and how successful, in the broadest terms, we can be.

Giving recognition freely makes us a person people like to work for and with, and one whom they naturally gravitate towards. However, for some of us, recognising all the types of support we receive will be unnatural to begin with. You may need to count the recognitions you give, until 'recognising' becomes natural. And if you find it

difficult to think of contributions in the first place, think of those who have provided guidance that has been helpful, those actions done by others that make your life easier and lastly the unwavering support and commitment by others.

Do not underestimate the power of the signed memo or letter recognising superior performance.

And remember, giving recognition will attract a more positive view of your own performance!

### Have a cluster of mentors to support you

Over the last 10 years I estimate that some 90% of all finance people at my seminars and workshops do not have mentors – it is no wonder corporate accountants are so isolated.

Jack Welch<sup>1</sup>, author and ex-CEO of General Electric, talks about having a cluster of mentors. One will never be enough. Feeling that you have arrived and do not need a mentor is like a matador who turns away from the bull to the adoring crowd to show his bravery – a gesture of utter stupidity that will one day have painful consequences.

Mentors have many invaluable functions, from helping you navigate tricky stages in your career, to advising on managing relationships, to steering you towards great career opportunities.

### Contribute to the organisation's intranet and newsletter

The intranet is the centre of the organisation's universe so it is logical to treat this as important. Have informative intranet pages for the finance team, including success stories and photos and short-form CVs of all of the team's members.

Similarly, contribute to your organisation's newsletter. Treat it as a priority and not a chore. Ensure you have content ready for each issue.

Also, you need to ensure someone from the finance team is attending corporate functions. Corporate accountants lose the plot when they work on a meaningless deadline instead of attending a corporate event where all the big players are. Watch the events the marketing team attends and replicate: marketing is a past master of networking, after all.

### Celebrate more

When those in finance are seen working into the night, colleagues tend to wonder what they are doing. Surely they aren't doing anything of value, since if they did valuable activities they would celebrate them?

A celebration is a great communicator of success. It tells others you have performed well. Yet corporate accountants often go from one deadline to the next, deferring the celebration for a quiet time sometime in the future. If you tend to follow that pattern, you are missing a vital PR event. Let's face it, the marketing team is celebrating all the time, telling everyone how successful it is.

## ‘Quality business attire and a well groomed appearance are “tickets to the game”’

### Be great on your feet

Far too often those in finance short change themselves by undercooking their preparation and practice time before giving a presentation.

Being great on your feet is a skill you need to adopt before you can be effective. So it is best to start now. I will assume that you have attended a presentation skills course – a prerequisite to delivering bulletproof presentations. Speed of delivery, voice levels, using silence and getting the audience to participate are all techniques that you need to be familiar with and comfortable using.

There are at least 25 rules for a good presentation (which I have discussed in detail elsewhere)<sup>2</sup>, but below are a few for you to consider:

- At least 10 to 20% of your slides should be high – quality photographs, some of which will not even require a caption. Read Garr Reynolds<sup>3</sup> and Nancy Duarte<sup>4</sup> on this.
- Last-minute slide presentations should be seen as a career-limiting activity. You would not hang your dirty washing in front of a hundred people, so why would you want to deliver a poorly thought through and unpractised presentation? Only agree to a presentation if you have the time, resources and enthusiasm to do the job properly.
- Use Guy Kawasaki’s ‘10/20/30 rule’ for a sales pitch presentation. Have ten slides, last no more than 20 minutes, and ensure all content is no smaller than 30 pt.
- Bring theatrics into your presentation. Be active as a presenter, walking up the aisle so that those in the back see you close up, vary your voice, get down on one knee to emphasise an important point; have a bit of fun and your audience will as well.
- Practise your delivery. The shorter the presentation, the more you need to practise. For my father’s eulogy, I must have read it through 20 to 30 times. It is the best speech I have ever delivered and the one I prepared most for.

### Learn to see the wood for the trees

Why is it that many hardworking corporate accountants, dedicated to the organisation, find themselves at best ignored or at worst ostracised by their colleagues? Some of the possible reasons are that they:

- are workaholics who make all other team members feel inferior;
- undertake tasks in such detail that they make work for their team members and colleagues;
- always complain about being overworked, albeit most of their excess workload is self-inflicted;
- treat every activity as if their life depended on it; and
- are too intense, often boring others with unnecessary detail.

If you are one of these people, there is time to change before it is too late.

### Look a million dollars

Look a million dollars and you will feel like a million dollars. Note that most of your organisation’s successful managers actually look successful. Observe them and create a look of ‘success’ that you are comfortable with. Far too often I see corporate accountants apparently proudly boasting about how little they spend in this area. They are making a mistake. It could be said that quality business attire and a well groomed appearance are ‘tickets to the game’.

### Conclusion

It is no good moaning that the finance team is not appreciated by the organisation. Working hard into the night, day after day unfortunately does not enhance one’s reputation. To succeed you need to manage the perception of the finance team’s contribution. You do this through marketing the finance team and yourself.

### Suggested next steps

- Find yourself a mentor or two;
- attend a ‘train the trainers’ course to take your presentations to the next level;
- read the books featured in this article;
- organise that celebration that you have been deferring for sometime; and
- list the recognitions and networking you are going to do next week, and ‘just do it’.

### FINANCE & MANAGEMENT FACULTY

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### REFERENCES

1. Jack Welch and Suzy Welch, *Winning*, HarperBusiness.
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