



**Bill Bradley, Principal
Bottom Line Communications**

February may be the shortest month of the year, but it sure seems like the longest one to me. Groundhog Day only underscores my point.

By this time, the festivity and togetherness of the Holiday Season and New Year are long gone. And signs of spring are still weeks away (except for baseball fans who are rejoicing spring training this month).

February does have at least one saving grace: Valentine's Day! For at least one day, we're invited to get romantic and/or flirtatious ... some find it hard to choose and combine the two with unfortunate results. I'm doubly blessed in that my wife and grand-daughter have birthdays this month just two days apart.

In the business world, fears of a recession are taking a toll on financial markets. With the presidential race in full swing, issues related to the nervous economy have replaced the war in Iraq as priorities among voters. But none of these issues will go away soon. Seems just like February, doesn't it?

Closer to home, we're hopefully fast out of the gate on the way to reaching our goals for the year. But we learn that business is like life: a journey and not a destination. So we try to keep the daily wins and losses in perspective, and remain focused on putting forth our best efforts in everything we do.

February *could* have been the best year ever for football fans in our region. Like most of us in New England and others around the country, I'm still in shock that the New England Patriots came up short in the Super Bowl. Gone is the historic, spotless 19-0 season, which reminds us that perfection is so seldom attainable. Ah, but the *pursuit* of perfection was breathtaking.

This is worth keeping in mind because in life, in love, in business, we try to make all the right moves. While the pursuit of perfection is an elusive goal, most of us can't help ourselves.

Besides, things will look a lot brighter once we're finally past February, right?

Where are you on the road to market leadership? (part 4)

Last month I talked about the Differentiation layer in my Market Positioning Pyramid. This is where companies work to distinguish themselves from the competition...but not from the marketplace itself.

This month, I'll address the key elements of Preference, which build on Differentiation. Preference is the level where customers form a special bond with your company for reasons that often transcend considerations of product or service alone.

Apple Computer, Nordstrom department store and Lexus cars are examples of brands that, despite less than unequivocal competitive advantage, have parlayed differentiation into preference and appeal primarily based on the superior service they provide.

Establishing preference is a function of the following .

- **Win rate starts to climb.** This is the surest sign that your differentiation messages, such as competitive strengths and why this matters to customers, are getting through. You're beginning to win market share, which is the essential ingredient in market leadership, the ultimate goal.

Get recognized for being innovative – and successful

What company doesn't consider itself innovative? But innovation is like beauty...judged in the eye of the beholder.

Then again, innovation is essentially wasted if it does not translate into business success.

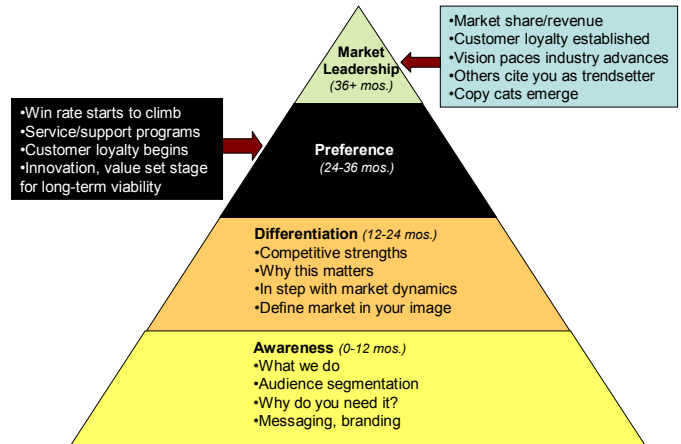
Since 1986, the annual New

England Innovation (NEI) Award program from the Smaller Business Association of New England (SBANE) has addressed this very point. Nominees are judged not just for their innovation, but also on their resulting business success. Semifinalists and finalists are named,

and the 2008 winners will be announced at a gala banquet in May. Talk about great PR!

The Call for Nominations runs through Feb. 21, but may be extended. Visit www.sbane.org for details. There is no fee to submit a nomination, and non-profits are eligible this year for the first time.

The Market Positioning Pyramid



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- **Service/support programs.** We've all experienced times dealing with suppliers where the level of service and support either drove us away vowing never to return...or won our devotion vowing never to shop anywhere else. Companies that believe product and price alone are the only things that matter to customers will never reach the level of preference.
- **Customer loyalty begins.** As your win rate climbs and your service/support programs mature into winning processes that become second nature to your employees,

you develop loyal customers. It's at this point that preference translates directly to profitability.

- **Innovation, value set stage for long-term viability.** Of course, you haven't stopped improving your core products and services. But combined with superior service and support, and the customer loyalty thus engendered, you're a market force to be reckoned with for a long time.

We'll close this series in March by examining market leadership, the highest layer in the Market Positioning Pyramid.



The mission of Northeast Business Alliance (NeBA) is to serve the business and entrepreneurial community by providing easy access to top quality professionals and services in an effort to stimulate, educate, guide and support business development and growth.

For more information, visit www.NortheastBusinessAlliance.com

Need Outsourced Talent Fast? Look No Further!

Growing businesses pressed for time to find highly skilled professionals to handle a wide range of vital projects on an outsourced basis now have a new bookmark for their web browsers.

The Northeast Business Alliance, Inc. (NeBA) launched operations this month as an online community, serving the region's business owners and entrepreneurs by providing easy online access to seasoned professionals who are experts in their specific fields.

"Business owners and execu-

tives are always looking for senior-level business professionals who are skilled in working with growing companies, their clients and customers," said Neil Gould, NeBA president and senior partner of Gould & Company, located in Merrimack, N.H. "We simplify the process of finding these highly-skilled professionals."

NeBA is a non-profit organization, so there are no charges or referral fees for using NeBA.

The NeBA professional services directory lists members by category. Membership is exclusive

and on a referral only basis. I am pleased to be the member associated with the category of corporate public relations.

New categories will be added, but for now they consist of:

- Advertising & marketing
- Business acquisition
- Business development
- Finance
- Legal
- Public relations
- Sales lead generation
- Valuation services
- Website development

How Can I Help You? How about 5 Ways to Get Press Coverage without a News Release?

To many sales and marketing professionals, "doing PR" is the equivalent of pounding out news releases in order to obtain media coverage. In fact, some companies have a "measure quality by the ton" mentality when it comes to issuing news releases.

In truth, only a small percentage of news releases actually results in media coverage. Journalists are flooded with hundreds of announcements every day, and are obliged to cover the dominant companies. That leaves relatively little room for all those releases from "tier 2" vendors and niche players.

The good news is that there are a number of ways to get great

media coverage *without* issuing news releases. Below are five techniques I use all the time.

#1 Read what the media writes on your market and suggest reasons to write more.

While your area of specialty is probably covered a lot, your approach might be overlooked. You find yourself inwardly screaming, "Hey, we should have been in there too!" There's always room for a new angle to any story. I contact these journalists to suggest factual follow-on ideas that reflect your views.

#2 Let your customers and partners do the talking.

The whole point of securing positive media coverage is that

someone knowledgeable, *other than you*, is saying nice things about your company. Satisfied customers always say it best, and the media is constantly looking for customers and channel partners willing to talk.

#3 Write articles and give speeches.

The better the topic, the better your chances of coverage that could make you a celebrity and spark a lot of interest. Look at the impact the blogosphere has had. The media thrives on this kind of live ammunition.

#4 Get your products reviewed.

I find print and/or online outlets that publish product reviews in my client's categories.

If I don't see one, I try to convince the outlet why it should. A great review can change your market position overnight.

#5 Track editorial calendars.

Most publications publish a list of their upcoming features and special sections. When I see a possible fit for a client, I find out what slant they're taking. Better yet, I give them reasons to develop the story my way.

Special offer! Call or email me for a **complimentary** 30-minute consultation on this or any other PR topic. That's an \$87 value! My phone number is 978/692-7422; email is bill@bottomlinecomm.biz.

Spin and Spun

Groundhogs know all about good publicity...but squirrels need to get with the program! That's Bill on the left in the photo below contemplating all this and more with acclaimed publicity expert Paul Hartunian at a recent marketing conference.

