



How to Make Prospects Want You More Than Life Itself

by D Bnonn Tennant, the Information Highwayman



How do you stand out as the most desirable option compared to everyone else who's offering what you're offering?

Unless you're in a magical new market, you have four obvious options: quality, price, features...or you can hope that some of your prospects don't notice that anyone exists except you. The proverbial Ostrich Approach. (Interesting side-note: ostriches don't actually stick their heads in the sand when threatened. Like most animals, they either run away, or kick your head in. Trust me, I'm from Africa.)

Anyway, these four options are all crap because trying to be the best at any of them will probably put you out of business.

So old school marketers will tell you to develop a Unique Selling Proposition, or USP. Pick a benefit that your competition isn't emphasizing, and advertise the hell out of it until you own that segment of your customer's mind.

Look, the USP was invented in the 1940s. A virtual dark age with waaaay fewer people marketing themselves. So it was much easier to find a unique benefit. But *now*, every second person on the web is trying to sell something, and...

BEING UNIQUE ISN'T ENOUGH

If you want to succeed, you need what original Mad Man David Ogilvy called a "big idea". Which sounds kinda wanky to me, so I call it a **motif**: a central theme or idea which binds all of your marketing together. Which I'm sure tells you nothing, really. Let me rephrase.



D Bnonn Tennant, Information Highwayman—Attention-Thievery & Conversion Rate Optimization
dbnonn@informationhighwayman.com ♦ www.informationhighwayman.com

A MOTIF IS A STORY

Stories tie your product to more than the sum of its features or benefits. Remember, emotion is the engine that drives the sale (reason is just the steering wheel). And emotion is at the heart of every story. So when you link your product to a story, you're linking it with something bigger than itself. Something which appeals to a deep part of us. You engage your reader by getting him to empathize with characters, rather than simply evaluating features and benefits. And by having him visualize things, you also bypass the rational processing parts his brain—and go straight to deeper, less skeptical centers.

Think of the image associated with .44 Magnums and Harley Davidson motorcycles. They were *defined* by the stories they appeared in and the characters who used them. In 1970, the .44 Magnum was a fairly pointless weapon which enthusiasts had no need for—a rifle in a pistol's body. But then *Dirty Harry* hit the screens, and repressed house-husbands across America just *had* to have “the most powerful handgun in the world” (it wasn't). And the same happened with Harleys. Bike enthusiasts wouldn't touch them because of a history of unreliability. Then Arnie swung his leg over one in *Terminator 2*, and paunchy mid-lifers who wanted to recapture their badass glory years *needed* a hog.

Their desire had nothing to do with features.

Okay, sure, you can't get your product fortuitously featured in a movie. And your online audience is impatient. You have to tell your story fast. Perhaps in as few as six words—like this gem from Ernest Hemingway (allegedly):—

For sale: baby shoes, never used.

SO A MOTIF SHOULD ALSO BE SIMPLE

Here's a more down-to-earth example, which illustrates how emotion is the selling engine, and reason is the steering wheel. Have you heard of Saddleback

Leather? No? Go ahead and check out their website: www.saddlebackleather.com.

Notice how one of their core values is “quality built to last”? Not exactly a unique claim, eh? How many companies say something similar? It’s decidedly non-unique-selling-propositionish. But look how they turn this generic value into a motif. Check out their headline:

They’ll Fight Over It when You’re Dead

Quality? Check. “They’ll fight over it.” People don’t fight over rubbish. Built to last? Check. It’ll still be good enough to fight over...after you’ve used it your whole life.

Motif? Check! How can you resist leatherwork so good that in fifty years time, after you’ve finally kicked the bucket, your relatives will be at each other’s throats for it?

This is a consummate motif. In just seven words, it puts a unique angle on an otherwise ordinary claim, while at the same time implying a story that engages your imagination. Your emotions are in play now—and all you need to cinch the sale is proof that these bags really are quality. This is provided in spades; check out the site, seriously, it’s a first-rate example of how to get people to buy your stuff. Not that the design is perfect by any means, but the general approach is just unbeatable.

ONE MORE THING: THE BEST MOTIF SURPRISES YOUR PROSPECT

It probably took you just the smallest second to figure out what the Saddleback Leather motif was saying. That’s how a motif should be. When your prospect first comes across it, he should pause for just a moment—and then experience a tiny thrill.

Now, be careful. There’s a huge, inept industry in advertising built around being shocking or funny—as if entertaining people will provoke them to buy things. It does the opposite. Cleverness for the sake of cleverness is nothing but

creative masturbation, if you'll pardon my bluntness. It's quickly appreciated, and quickly forgotten. There's no lasting appeal in being cutesy or comical.

The surprise of a motif is not that kind of surprise. Rather, it comes from an unexpected combination of ideas. For Saddleback Leather, it's in taking a common guarantee and extrapolating it into a provocative picture. Finding a way to juxtapose two ideas is the first step in coming up with a mighty motif.

THREE HANDY PLACES TO FIND THE RAW MATERIALS FOR YOUR MOTIF

All right, I'm gonna warn you up front that this section is quite long. If you can't read it right now, set aside some time to go through it later, because I promise it's valuable. I'm going to give you three places to look for a motif. Let's dig right in.

1. PERSONALITY

Question: if two kids set up lemonade stands, and both their lemonade is pretty much the same, which one do you think will get more customers?

If you're thinking there's no way to tell, maybe you didn't go to school! The correct answer is: the more popular kid.

Luckily the internet ain't exactly like school, or I'd never have made it in business. But some things apply universally, and personality is one of 'em. The more appealing you are to others, the more likely they are to buy your stuff.

As a small business owner, you're selling yourself as much as any product or service. So don't be afraid to use your personality as the basis for your motif. If you're in any way interesting, it's probably the easiest, most genuine way to connect with your prospects.

Here's an example you might well be familiar with: Naomi Dunford. The first thing that comes to mind when I think of Naomi is how she reminds me of Billy Connolly in her affection and aptitude for using expletives to make her point. Most entrepreneurs would shrivel up and die rather than present themselves to prospects like Naomi does—even if that's how they naturally are.

This cravenness allows Naomi to set herself apart extremely effectively. It also attracts exactly the kinds of clients she wants...while making the ones she doesn't want run for the hills. And I'd wager her clients are attracted to her too. They don't hire her because she's better than her competitors—but because she's the no-bullshit, straight-talking, keepin'-it-real kinda gal they want.

In other words, her personality is more desirable to them than the personalities of her competitors.

COMING UP WITH A PERSONALITY

It might sound kind of funny to have to think about how you'll come up with a personality. After all, don't you already have one?

Sure, but remember motifs are simple. Personalities are complex. So pick the parts of yourself that you can play to strongly, which resonate with others—then build a persona or archetype around them. Like a “superhero alter-ego”.

If you're stuck, here's a simple suggestion: think of characters you really identify with in movies or books, and base your persona around them. For my own part, I took a dash of Han Solo, a bit of the tenth Doctor, and threw in a liberal dose of Mal Reynolds for good measure.

2. PICTURES

Personality is great if you're selling yourself, but it's not always so useful if you're trying to find a motif for a specific product or service. Enter pictures.

Here's a great example from Gene Schwartz, one of the genuine masters of direct-response advertising in the twentieth century. He wrote a promotion for a weight-loss product—a topic for which I'd personally struggle to come up with an interesting angle. Here's the motif he used, captured succinctly in his headline:

Turns up your 'Digestive Furnace' and burns flab right out of your body!

With the hindsight of decades of those sorts of claims, this might not seem like such a great angle. But...the same can be said about *Star Wars*—and look how successful that was. It was something truly special in its own time.

A “digestive furnace” that “burns flab”—do you see the word picture being created in your mind? You’re not just understanding that this is a weight-loss product. You’re seeing the product in action, “melting” your flab away.

Visual metaphors like this are immensely powerful because they not only help your prospects to understand your product by comparing it to something they “get”, but because going straight to the visual part of the brain bypasses that pesky prefrontal cortex. Which means you engage your prospects at a deeper level than plain old rational decision-making.

Maybe that sounds sneaky on first blush—but it’s actually the opposite. Remember, people don’t want to just make cold, logical decisions about the things they buy, because they just don’t buy for cold, logical reasons. They need to be emotionally invested, and pictures help them get that emotional engine running.

COMING UP WITH A PICTURE

This can be tricky. If something doesn’t immediately jump out at you, then it’s time to get brainstorming. Ask yourself what your product is like. If you had to explain it using an analogy, how might you do that?

Once you get some ideas flowing, you’d be surprised how quickly you can come up with some interesting pictures that can capture the imagination. Then your only problem is figuring out which one to use! And for more on that, you’ll want to check out the final section of this report.

3. PROPOSITIONS

Propositions are ideas, concepts, statements. If you’re having a hard time finding a motif using personality or pictures, try thinking of compelling propositions. You can often bring in pictures or personality later, for added oomph.

For example, The Wall Street Journal has been running a sales letter since 1974 that's netted over \$2 *billion* smackaroos so far. They've tested heaps of different letters. Dozens of copywriters have tried beating it. But this one is still on top. It's based around this simple proposition:

The difference between successful people and ordinary people is knowledge, properly applied.

The letter tells the story of two college graduates, “very much alike”, who go on to work at the same company. One becomes a manager; one becomes its president. The punchline: that the president had the kind of knowledge contained in The Wall Street Journal; the manager didn't.

There's a picture in there too—but it's all in support of that proposition: that success depends on the right knowledge. Or, put another way: knowledge is power.

COMING UP WITH A PROPOSITION

Look at clichés, truisms, proverbs. Adages and even stereotypes can be useful too. There's just bucketloads of fodder in our cultural memes that you can exploit by making the right connection. All you gotta do is find one that you can relate to your offering in a clear, logical way.

2 SIMPLE WAYS TO GET YOUR MOTIF POLISHED & SHINING LIKE CAPTAIN PICARD'S HEAD

There are just a couple more things you need to know about motifs. Specifically, two pointers for refining your raw idea into a *true* motif. Here they are:

1. IT'S NOT A MOTIF UNTIL YOU CAN SAY IT IN ONE SENTENCE

Remember, on the web, you haven't got much time. So your motif has to be

really simple. Once you've got an initial idea for your motif, try to explain it to yourself in as few words as possible. Write it down.

You'll probably use several sentences. This is okay. But your goal is to keep refining until you can capture your idea in a single sentence. Once it's that simple, prospects will be able to instantly grasp it—which is what you need for it to work.

The great thing about this process of refining is that you usually end up with something much better than what you started with. In the beginning, you have only a raw idea, like a raw rock. But a motif is like a polished jewel.

For example, one of my early clients was a data recovery company. They “bring data back from the dead”. Here's an excerpt from the web copy I wrote for them—the motif is the heading smack-bam in the center:

You've talked to computer stores and repair shops, but they can't help. They're just computer doctors, and like real doctors they can only heal the sick. Your data has passed on, kicked the bucket, bought the farm—gone to the great hard drive in the sky.

What you need is someone who can recover data from the dead...

We specialise in revivifying hard drives, summoning lost files, and conjuring data back from the great beyond.

See how the motif itself can be summed up in a single sentence—but it provides the basis for a whole set of copy?

2. IT HAS TO GET THE NOD

I'm a direct-response marketer by training. And the first rule of direct-response marketing is *test everything*.

Sometimes, you'll come up with an idea for a motif that just seems like pure genius. You can't wait to use it—but then, when you eagerly (and prematurely) roll

it out, it flops.

A motif is something that has a broad appeal. As broad, that is, as your ideal prospect base. So before you go off half-cocked with an idea that seems good to you, make sure it seems good to the people it's aimed at. This might sound like obvious advice, but it's a common mistake (especially among more creative types).

Always run your ideas past a few people who have perspective. If they don't get it, "it's not them...it's you!" Accept that your idea doesn't have the mass appeal you thought it did, and move on. You'll save yourself a lot of trouble.

I believe this is what wives (and husbands) were invented for.

The data recovery motif above is actually an apt example. You see, I originally conceived of it as "digital necromancy". (Necromancy, of course, is the art of communicating with—and, in popular games, also resurrecting—the dead.)

The client loved it. He's a bit of a gamer and sci-fi geek. But when we tested the idea against the sorts of people who would be his typical clients, they didn't understand it. Actually...some of them thought we were talking about necrophilia. So we dropped the necromancy angle in a hurry, and went with a simpler version.

NOW IS THE TIME TO GET STARTED ON YOUR MOTIF

Look at your personality—is there something about you which you can exaggerate or play off? Look at your product—is there a compelling metaphor in there you can use to create a picture? Look at the benefits you're offering—is there a strong cultural meme you can connect them with to create a compelling proposition? Once you find something, pare it down until you can state it in a single sentence. And then run it by someone else to be sure it's good.



Howdy, I'm Bnonn. The "B" is silent. I'm known in the boroughs as the Information Highwayman—the scoundrelous author of conversion-rate optimization course *Attention-Thievery 101*. I'm self-trained in direct marketing, and spend my days helping small businesses get more out of their websites by improving both their copy and design. When I'm not knee-deep in the guts of someone's homepage, I'm writing, speaking, or reading about how to turn more visitors into customers—and when I'm not doing *that* I'm teaching my kids about steampunk, Nathan Fillion, and how to grapple a zombie without getting bit.

If you haven't already, how would you like to get hold of my 25 free videos that teach you more about how to turn visitors into customers? Yeah? Just click here:—

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www.attentionthievery.info



D Bnonn Tennant

bnonn@informationhighwayman.com

www.informationhighwayman.com