



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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So What Do You Do?

by Mark E. Green

Editor's Note: No accountants, labor attorneys or morticians were harmed in the writing of this article.

Most of us aren't very effective at describing what we do for a living. This is particularly problematic if your professional responsibilities include selling, (note to business owners and consultants: this includes you). To be fair, part of the problem is in the question we're usually answering—"What do you do?" but it's also in how we choose to answer it.

Humans have a need for order that drives us to classify the world around us. We have "good" friends, we know doctors, your next-door neighbor is a firefighter, your father is a former marine—you get the picture. In fact, we've been conditioned to classify people and we do it through some basic questions. "Where do you live?" "Where did you go to

school?" And, of course, the question of the moment here is—"So what do you do?" We believe that the answers to these questions tell us more than meets the eye—information about social status, economic status, points of view and more. What we're really asking for is help; help making sure that we classify the other person correctly.

The flip side of this is that we've been conditioned to help others classify us, so we can be assured that we wind up in the right bin in their minds. This is why we so readily answer these types of questions with the expected, brief instant-messenger-type responses. "I live on the West Side." "I attended Notre Dame." "I am an actuary."

Somewhat nefariously, and just as we were conditioned, we do our best to pass more of the same to the next generation. For example,

(continued on page 18)



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Turn Your Name into Your Brand • from page 8

your name and contact information prominently displayed.

Other marketing communications tools—newsletters, Web sites, advertising and public relations—are also very important and should be part of a carefully crafted marketing plan.

You may never achieve brand recognition akin to Donald Trump's, but then again, his level of fame is not necessarily your goal.

Concentrate on building your professional quality and brand, and you'll reap more realistic, but equally impressive, rewards. □



So What Do You Do? • from page 9

when was the last time you asked one of your kids (or nieces / nephews) what he or she wants to be when he grows up? The effects of conditioning are both powerful and lasting—this is the primary reason that we grew up to be much like our parents and that our children will be, for better or for worse, much like us.

So, what's an actuary to do?

Start with the realization that saying "I'm an actuary" isn't the answer to the question, "What do you do?" In answering that way, you're falling victim to your conditioning and trying to help the other person assign you a label to place you in the correct mental bin. "Actuary" is a convenient label that helps do that, although as I hope you'll see, it also drastically oversimplifies and, in most cases waters-down, the truth and any semblance of value that results from what you actually do. In addition, think about the company you'll find in the "actuary bin" in the other person's mind! Accountants, labor attorneys and morticians* to be sure.

Allow me to propose an alternate path. Take a quiet moment and give some serious thought to the benefits that you provide to your clients, be they internal or external to your organization. Ponder your value to your organization and to your organization's clients. These are the same things—benefits and value—that cause people to engage your services. If in attempting this exercise you just can't identify anything more compelling than "I need an actuary," dig deeper—way deeper.

You might discover that what you really "do" includes helping businesses manage risk, increase their profitability, and spend more time focused on the technical aspects of their industry for competitive advantage. Now that's of

value. What's more, I'm sure there are other, even more compelling reasons out there. In fact, and I'm not a betting man, I would wager that any one of them would sure sound a lot more impressive than "I'm an actuary," wouldn't it?

In giving these alternative answers, you're providing information that is more business-oriented and value-driven. It speaks precisely to the results of your work. This is the type of information that doesn't just go into the "bin;" rather it's usually processed into a follow-up question. And follow-up questions lead to dialogues, dialogues to relationships, and relationships to business transactions.

As you'll discover, although it takes work, the rewards can be great when you question an element of your status quo and identify a more productive approach to serve your purposes. So what'll it be? Accountants, labor attorneys and morticians (oh my!)—or real, differentiating value that leads to a deeper understanding and dialogue of what you're actually about? Your results will speak for themselves. □

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