

The marketing Value Proposition: The 'Golden Rule' in action

Bill Westwood suggests that companies deliver a broad value in what they do by bringing order out of chaos and subjecting all creation to the rule of God. The Value Proposition is basically the law of love, includes sensitive communication of the value offered and applies to churches and not-for-profit organisations too.

Ever since I left school in 1974 and joined the marketing department of a major (unfortunately now defunct) motor manufacturer, I have loved marketing. It was the genesis of a lifelong passion for the business world and happened to broadly coincide with the start of my faith journey too. Not that faith and business are separate journeys; it's a partnership made in heaven. Unfortunately the business and ecclesiastical worlds that we inhabit today all too often collide in conflict and misunderstanding. For that, they are both the poorer.

I will never know whether or not I would have been a force to be

reckoned with in marketing (although I suspect not) because somewhere along the way I got lost and became an accountant instead! But finance did teach me how companies worked, and when I finally got to manage a business, it was a big help having a 'numbers' background because it's the numbers that tell the story of the value that a business delivers to its clients. Value fascinates me, and if you are in a frontline commercial function one of the things you learn pretty quickly is that 'everyone understands cost, but not many understand value'. I believe that value is not only at the heart of

business; I shall show how it's also at the heart of the fundamental biblical narratives of creation and redemption. In fact it's at the heart of life itself.

Value in business

The way that we thrive in business is by taking materials and services and adding value to them to create a profit. Now profit is a legitimate reward to a company for creating value, but you cannot put a price on everything. The community created when individuals work together in a company is also value, as are programmes that deliver sustainable environmental outcomes. In other

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Order out of Chaos
 Scottish Sculpture Workshop's Jennifer Argo making the world a better place

words, as Christian business people, our definition of terms like 'value' and 'wealth' are much broader than the purely economic outcomes used in their calculations by those working in the financial markets.

Value in the biblical narrative

At the outset of the creation narrative, God said: 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Gen 1:28). This is adding value. As Greg Beale observes in his excellent chapter in *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, the mission of the first family was to "extend the smaller liveable area of the garden by transforming the outer chaotic region into habitable territory", to make the world a better place and establish the kingdom, as in the rule of God, across the planet.¹ Christ's work of salvation includes the potential for us to fulfil that mission of adding true value by collaborating with him in the process of bringing order out of chaos and subjecting all creation to the rule of God. When we put the kingdom first, in our businesses, our neighbourhoods, and our churches, we are adding value to humanity and to the planet, and participating in the greatest story of

them all, the redemption of *all* things in Christ (Rom 8:20-22; Col 1:20).

The Value Proposition

Have you ever been in a meeting where a potential client has asked: "what is your value proposition?" It usually means: "why should I buy your product rather than someone else's?" It's a really good question, so much so that the Value Proposition (VP) has become an almost compulsory feature of corporate 'bling' these days. Indeed it's talked about so much that one might easily think that it's 'as old as the hills', but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact it's a relatively new term in marketing 'speak', first coined in a 1988 McKinsey staff paper in which a business was described as a "value delivery system", and where that value could be articulated by a VP.² Lanning later more comprehensively articulated his concept of a VP as:

"The combination of resulting experiences, including price, which an organization delivers to a group of intended customers in some time frame, in return for those customers buying/using and otherwise doing

*what the organization wants rather than taking some competing alternative."*³

Value is Crucial

I know this all sounds a bit theoretical but there are a few important concepts being kicked around here. The first is that our organisations and institutions themselves are no more, or less, than 'value delivery systems' whose whole *raison d'être* is to deliver value to the client (whoever that might be); outside of this they are nothing more than imposters. This doesn't have to be an idea that is purely restricted to 'for profit' businesses either, it applies to third sector organisations and, dare I say it, even to ecclesiastical ones too. Delivering value to the client, meeting their needs and wherever possible, exceeding their expectations, is to fulfil the golden rule to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:39). In serving and loving others we are serving God inasmuch as humanity bears the *imago Dei*.

The second key idea is that of articulating and communicating value in such a way that the client can

readily understand what the value on offer is. This point sounds basic, but actually few organisations really do it. Frow and Payne (2008) did a survey across 265 managers and discovered that, although 65% of the respondents confirmed that the term VP was used in their organisations, only 8% of them had any formal process for developing one.⁴ The term, VP, generates a lot of buzz; it sounds cutting edge, it is cutting edge, but we are all adept at somehow accommodating new ideas into our predetermined worldviews and missing the opportunity to embrace radical new ones.

Defining Value

It's easy to understand why this might happen. First of all it's really hard to define a VP because it requires a depth of client insight that most of us never attain; it's a lot of work, and we are too saddled with our own self-interest and the need to make annual sales or profit targets to do it thoroughly enough. It's what Jesus called 'the log in your eye' (Matt 7:5), that inability to see beyond ourselves and our own agendas. It's much easier to use the term in the context of our own company and its products and make generic statements, which is what usually happens in most companies. We might say, for example, that the paint that we sell has better coverage than any others on the market. Well, that sounds good, but we don't know if this is really important to this particular customer or not, so it's

more like a company USP (Unique Selling Proposition) that differentiates us from our competitors, rather than a real customer VP that articulates a compelling value to a specific client or group of clients.


Persuasion or Communication?

Faced with this scenario it's inevitable that product marketing becomes about persuasion, whereas it should really be about communication, communicating the VP. I like the way that Flint McGlaughlin puts it in his delightful book *The Marketer as Philosopher* (where else can you find a marketing book that quotes Plato, Milton, Pascal, Hemingway, and Drucker together?): "people don't want to be marketed to, people want to be communicated with".⁵ We see this clearly in Jesus' ministry: when he called Peter and Andrew he invited them to become "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19), but he didn't do that for the woman at the well. He said that "whoever drinks of the water that I will give will never be thirsty again" (John 4:14). Here we see Jesus communicating a clear VP that resonated with different people's lives. In contrast, whether we are selling products or even discussing the gospel, we can too often be like the proverbial man with the hammer who thinks that every problem must therefore be a nail.

'Everyone knows what cost is, but few understand value, right?

However, it would be a fallacy to think that articulating a clear and concise VP is a fool-proof way to make a sale. It will make an enormous difference, but even Jesus didn't make the sale every time. Take the story of the rich young ruler whom Jesus invited to "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor" (Mark 10:21). I must have heard a dozen sermons lamenting the young man's lack of commitment to the cost of discipleship, but for me, this completely misses the point. Jesus never asks for more than the young man can afford. The point is that the young man just doesn't see the value on offer even with a clearly articulated VP.....everyone knows what cost is, but few understand value, right?

Whatever institution we work in, whether it be commercial, ecclesiastical, profit or non-profit driven, its godly purpose is to deliver value. The gospel, whether worked out in the marketplace or the church, is about articulating this. I particularly love the NASB translation of Jeremiah 15:19, addressed to the prophet Jeremiah which we can apply to ourselves:

Therefore, thus says the Lord, "If you return, then I will restore you—Before Me you will stand; And if you extract the precious from the worthless, You will become My spokesman" 

1. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (ed. D. A. Carson; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 82.
2. Michael J Lanning and Edward G Michaels, "A Business is a Value Delivery System," *McKinsey Staff Paper* No 41 (1988)
3. Michael J Lanning, *Delivering Profitable Value* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 1998).
4. Ballantyne et al., *Service-Dominant logic and value propositions: Re-examining our mental models*, 46-47.
5. Dr Flint McGlaughlin, *The Marketer as Philosopher: 40 brief reflections on the power of your value proposition* (MECLABS, 2014), 29.



Bill Westwood spent the last 20 years of his career in senior roles in the global Packaging industry. Since stepping off the corporate ladder he has completed an MA in Theology and, when not trying to play golf, loves to "think a lot about Theology" and engage with Christian entrepreneurs to help them develop their businesses.