



Chapter 3

Have a fresh point of view (or several)

To stand out in our cluttered, noisy, skeptical world, we need a singular perspective—a point of view—that distinguishes us and helps people better understand our companies and products; that evokes conversation and makes it easy for people to talk to other people about our companies. This chapter will:

- * Explain what a point of view is and how it differs from traditional marketing basics like mission statements, value propositions, messages, and elevator speeches
- * Show how too many packaged messages but no discernible point of view can make a good company sound irrelevant
- * Take an inside look at the points of view and conversational marketing programs of three different organizations: Sun Microsystems, Unilever's Dove brand, and Women & Infants Hospital

A point of view sets you apart, speeds understanding, and provokes conversation

A point of view is a perspective that often evokes conversation. When we talk about our points of view, we begin with phrases like, “The way I see it . . .” or “What I’ve learned about . . .” or “From my perspective . . .” And in that context, we talk about our beliefs. Hopefully, when people hear your point of view, they say, “That’s interesting. Tell me more.” And even if they disagree, they may see things from a new point of view or get involved in talking about the ideas.

This active involvement helps companies learn more about customers, and helps customers learn more about the company in ways that help form bonds and lead to action. Involvement is a prerequisite to action, whether that action is changing a perception, deciding to buy, or adopting new beliefs and behaviors.

Having a point of view can help an organization stand for more than more of the same—and talk about ideas that help people get to know what the company is all about. People might not agree with your point of view, but they won’t ignore it either. As comedian Lily Tomlin once joked, “I always wanted to be somebody. Now I know I should have been more specific.”

Here are some specific points of view:

- * “We believe software is too complex—too many features, too many buttons, too much to learn. We build the best Web-based software products with *the least number of features*. Our products do less than the competition—intentionally,” claims 37signals, a Chicago-based software company that makes dead-simple Web offerings.

- * “When we talk to other people about Southwest Airlines, I always tell them that it’s got to *come from the heart* not from the head. It has to be spontaneous, it has to be sincere, it has to be emotional,” says Herb Kelleher, executive chairman of the board, Southwest Airlines.¹
- * Although many people see Starbucks as a fancy coffee shop, its chairman Howard Schultz sees the eight-thousand-store chain as a “third place” for people to hang out at in addition to home and work.²
- * “People feel like a rowboat bobbing in the ocean, but they could be more of an ocean liner if they would *diversify their assets, make a plan, and follow it*,” says Charles Schwab, chairman of Charles Schwab.³
- * “Our collective generation believes the desktop PC is the most important thing to give to people. *I don’t buy that*. The most important thing to give is access to the Internet,” says Jonathan Schwartz, president, Sun Microsystems.⁴
- * What makes the Ellen Tracy clothing line different? “What’s worked for Ellen Tracy for more than 50 years is the consistency of making apparel that elicits a ‘*Wow, she’s well dressed*,’” explains George Sharp, vice president of design, Ellen Tracy.⁵

A fresh point of view (or several) glues together programs, engages people in discussions, and liberates the marketing staff. A point of view is easy to understand, to remember, and to talk about in our own words. With a fresh point of view, people in and around the company suddenly have interesting things to talk about with customers (or the media, analysts, or employees).

The purpose of a point of view is to help people understand what an organization is actually all about. It shapes people’s feelings about whether to work with us, buy from us, or

invest in us. It's meant to provoke thinking and conversation versus explaining a product or capability or documenting vision, mission, values, or value proposition.

Although much has been written about the value of having a marketing story (see Seth Godin's book *All Marketers Are Liars* as an example), a story is of little value if it's not connected to a point of view. Stories are told to make a point.

"We may have forgotten the stories, but we remember the point," explains Joe Lambert of the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*. "In *King Lear* the point or central premise is 'blind trust leads to destruction.' In *Macbeth*, it is 'unbridled greed leads to destruction.' Every part of the dramatic action can be boiled down to serving these points of view."⁶

Similarly, marketing programs and communications can be simplified by making them serve a company or a brand's point of view.

The "so what" introduction of the new CA

When John Swainson took over as CEO of Computer Associates (CA), he had quite a bit of business cleaning up to do. He knew that he needed to reposition the company to hold on to customers and try to win new ones.

He hired Madison Avenue's top marketing strategy, branding, advertising, and public relations firms and put them to work to tell the story of the new organization he was leading. He had received positive feedback in conversations with customers, analysts, and reporters when he explained his strategy for the new Computer Associates, to be called simply CA. The strategy was to be highly ethical, focused on developing technology products that added real value for customers,

and be earnestly committed to making it easier to do business with CA.

A straight-shooting, plain-talking kind of guy, Swainson felt the company was now ready to tell its new story to the business industry.

The message makers, advertising masters, branding gurus, and spin doctors went to work, spent millions, and introduced the new CA to the world in grand style—full-page advertisements in business media; lavish customer parties in Las Vegas; press briefings; and a newly designed Web site, logo, and tag line.

People who heard Swainson himself explain the new strategy paid attention and opened their minds to the possibility that CA might have a chance to come back. But the rest of us who read the ads, went to the new Web site, or scanned the press releases had a hard time figuring out what CA was talking about. Darned if even my savviest technology executive friends could see things from CA's point of view.

The shallow ads demonstrated a lack of connection with market conversations. "Remember when technology had the power to inspire you? Believe again," said the headlines. Come on. Most of us techies never thought that technology had become less inspiring. CA, however, may have lost *its* inspiration along the way, which accounted for so little innovation and growth.

But we customers don't need to be told in ads to "believe again" in technology. What we need to be told is why we should believe again in CA and *its* technology.

Read more of CA's marketing and you're right back into all-about-me product information, expounding on its new vision of Enterprise IT Management (EITM), designed to "unify and simplify complex IT environments across the enterprise." But hello, what exactly is it? I know technology, yet I can't figure out what the big "aha!" is here.

Read further and see more trite lines and tired talk, much of which was used by other tech companies in the 1990s, such as “transforming business,” “unifying and simplifying complex IT environments,” “reach a higher order of IT,” “simplify the complex,” “deliver fully against your business goals.” Say what?

I’ve heard Swainson talk. He’s engaging and direct, which is why this marketing campaign is especially painful. Why didn’t he talk about his fresh ideas for growth, in his own words—not a copywriter’s? CA must have a point of view on enterprise technology that is contrarian, counterintuitive, unusual, insightful, or surprising. Also something other than money must be motivating Swainson and his team to take on the work of turning around a troubled \$3.5 billion global company. He should have talked about those ideas—in words real people use.

A new logo and name change don’t matter all that much today. Customers want to connect with the company and its people—not with a new acronym. They want to talk about new ideas. More than anything, people want a reason to believe in you. Give it to them straight up and help them understand the point and the beliefs behind that point.

If people don’t understand a company’s point of view and have a hard time making sense of all the marketing and sales materials, they often begin to suspect that perhaps there is no real strategy. “It’s not us,” they realize, “it’s them. The new logo and ad campaigns are attempts to hide the fact that the strategy is weak.”

Ten characteristics of a point of view

Not only do points of view help people to talk and to engage in meaningful discussions, but they help connect people with ideas

and concepts that help them better understand the company. Here is a review of ten characteristics of effective points of view. The first four are essential; the remaining six are good to have because they strengthen a point of view.

1. Engaging

An effective point of view evokes the response, “That’s kind of interesting. Tell me more.” It starts conversations rather than just informing. People want to know more and to offer their views as well.

2. True

Marketers can support a point of view with facts, trend information, aggregated insights, or other data. The more evidence there is to support a point of view, the greater the likelihood that people will accept it as credible.

3. Relevant

The more relevant the idea to the intended audience, the more interested people will be. A sixty-year-old will find discussions about long-term health care insurance and Social Security far more interesting than a twenty-year-old will.

4. Genuine

The organization has to believe in the idea—truly. Otherwise talking about it will be difficult, stilted, boring, hollow, and empty. People have a sixth sense for picking up on whether others really mean what they’re saying. There is no faking it. Either believe in it, or find something that you actually *do* care about.

5. *Fresh*

The view is different and new from most conversations around the topic. We all are probably guilty of defaulting to the latest industry “big idea,” and talking about it so much that no one wants to hear about it anymore. Sometimes, however, the point of view doesn’t need to be original and new. It simply needs to be framed and expressed in a new way, helping people to discover and talk about its other important aspects.

6. *Connects the dots*

A point of view should somehow connect to the business vision or strategy. It may be about practical aspects of your strategy (for example, why increasing prices 25 percent will help open new markets more quickly). Or it may be about building trust and relationships so people will feel good about doing business with the company—a prerequisite for nearly any strategic success. Connect the dots—the point of view to the strategy—otherwise it’s just talk.

7. *Memorable*

Does the point of view stick in a person’s head? Is it easy to remember? The view should be so simple and straightforward—in concept and in words—that there is no need for elaborate talking points, long explanatory documents, or in-depth training sessions so people can “get it.”

8. *“Talkable”*

Is it easy for people to talk about the concept in their own words and tell their own stories around it? Does it jump-start two-way talk?

9. *Leggy*

Does the idea resonate with multiple audiences, through multiple communications channels? The more legs a point of view has, the more you can build marketing and sales programs around it, so the talk adds up.

10. *Likeable*

Do people like talking about your point of view? Is it so inspiring, provocative, brave, or bold that they naturally jump into conversations about it?

How a point of view differs from vision, value proposition, messages, and elevator speeches

In marketing, a point of view from which we express ideas and beliefs is a fundamental element to be added to conventional fundamentals like vision, mission, value proposition statements, elevator speeches, and messaging documents. A point of view is an “also,” not an “instead of.”

The purpose of these conventional fundamentals is not to engage people in interesting conversations. They are directional, informative documents—more like maps and blueprints than motivational guides. They’re about the company’s intentions and objectives. Most are written to be read—not to be talked about or to spark meaningful debate or conversation.

“A vision is an inspirational statement of what you expect to do with the company or the brand,” explains Kevin Clancy, former marketing professor and CEO of the global marketing strategy firm Copernicus. “The mission is the operational prescription for what you need to do to accomplish the vision.

The positioning is simply a one- or two-sentence statement that is not about vision or not about mission as such, but is a message you want to imprint in the minds of customers and prospects. It is about your brand, product, or service, and how it is different from—and therefore better than—the competition’s.”⁷ Note that the focus is about the product or brand; these conventional statements are more *us*-focused than *other*-focused.

Vision	Why the organization exists; provides direction to what the company does
Mission	The action plan for accomplishing the vision
Values	Shared values, guiding behavior, and actions
Customer value proposition	Describes the value customers realize from doing business with the company or brand
Elevator speech	Simple sentence describing what the business is and how it differs from its competitors
Messaging	Most important points to convey about the company, product, or program
Point of view	Beliefs and ideas that help build understanding, provoke conversation—and are something a person would actually say

Think about corporate vision, mission, value proposition, and elevator speeches. How often do people talk about the mission statement with customers? When was the last time someone had a great conversation about the company’s values? How often do we go back to these documents to shape our thinking around a conversation we’ll be having with customers or analysts? Not often.

When friends ask, “Hey, what’s new with ABC corporation?” do you talk about the corporate values and recite the vision?

How jazzed are you when using the elevator speech? (Do any of us ever really use it?)

It's not that these documents are bad (although many say very little), it's that they're not intended to help us talk. Another problem with these documents is that creating them usually involves a tedious, drawn-out committee task, leaving participants almost as lifeless as the language in the statements. Management puts the documents on the Web and Intranets, prints them in little handbooks, and posts Ten Commandment-like posters in the hallways. Then hardly anyone pays attention to them until there's a new CEO, a merger, or the five-year plan calls for an update. That's why you can't rely on these documents for communications purposes.

They are only the beginning of marketing. If your marketing doesn't lead to some sort of dialogue with customers and market influencers, it's not effective marketing.

After completing fundamentals like targeting and positioning, the marketer's next job is to extract points of view from the organization that will generate conversations, which will help people to better understand an issue, a product, a business situation, or a company strategy.

How does the American Canadian Caribbean cruise line differ from all the other cruise ships? Since founding the company in 1966, Luther Blount's point of view was that cruising on one of his ships should feel like "sailing on your friend's yacht." And he firmly believed that passengers' money is better spent on getting to exciting nontouristy destinations than on "unnecessary frills" that other cruises offer.⁸

Sometimes a point of view captures a fresh take on industry issues, emerging trends, or common obstacles. Other times it is directly connected to the company's vision and value proposition but translated to be more "talkable," interesting, and engaging.

When your company maps out its key messages (sometimes known as *message pyramiding*), make sure its point of view is at the top of the pyramid. (Often, points of view aren't even in the pyramid, with traditional messaging and talking points being all about the company and its products.)

This overarching vocal message should captivate and engage, demonstrating that the company knows the issues so well that it can confidently offer a point of view and discuss that view in friendly, engaging conversations. Companies without articulate points of view are like many well-organized, well-funded political campaigns that lose elections. Attorney James Snyder, speechwriter to Mario Cuomo, the former governor of New York, has said that he's seen many candidates fail because their campaign messages are not engaging. He explains,

Few in a campaign spend much time thinking about the candidate's complete message. What a mistake. Because when all is said and done, what is actually seen or heard by the voters and media? A candidate speaking. A vocal message that captivates and charms or falls flat on its face and turns voters away in disgust and disappointment.⁹

William Safire, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, former White House speechwriter, and writer of the *New York Times Magazine* column "On Language," has a similar message in his *Political Dictionary*: "When a candidate does not have his own speech by the end of the campaign, he has not figured out in his own mind what the campaign was really all about."¹⁰

Same goes for business. What's our own point of view about our industry and our business? What really matters? What doesn't matter? What's important to customers but overlooked by us? What's beginning to emerge that could change the industry? Like

a political candidate, we need to figure out our complete message. And that includes our point of view.

**Sun Microsystems' point of view—
sharing, ending the digital divide**

Contrast CA to another big, global high-tech company that stumbled around the same time as CA but has a point of view—Sun Microsystems.

In 2005 Sun faced three challenges. One was that customers and the industry wondered whether the company was still relevant to the high-tech industry. Industry analysts and customers whispered, “Is Sun just a commodity hardware company too late to the open-source software party?”

The second challenge was that every Sun product division aggressively promoted its own products, using conventional feature-benefit product messages. It gave the sales force reams of product information to use with customers. As a result, sales reps had little of substance to discuss with senior-level decision makers.

Why was this? Because those buyers don't want to talk about products; they can have people on their staff look up that information on the Web. They want to talk to the sales reps about issues and trends, what's next in the industry, and what was going on with Sun. “Are you guys going to make it?” Customers aren't just buying technology; they're also buying the company behind the technology products.

The third challenge was that Sun had kissed and made up with long-time rival Microsoft the previous year. For years, Sun chairman Scott McNealy's point of view was pretty much that Microsoft was the evil empire and needed to be destroyed.

So Sun, a company that knew the value of a point of view, had nothing much to talk about, save for new types of servers, software, and grid computing. Everyone in marketing and at the executive level was frustrated. They knew the company was turning around. They believed the company's vision of "the network is the computer" was right. They understood that the new products were good. But something was missing. There was no cause to rally around.

"Scott stopped me in the hall one day and said, 'I think we need to be talking about sharing. How Sun's technology lets users participate in the Internet world and share ideas,'" remembers Ingrid Van Den Hoogen, Sun's vice president of marketing and brand communications. "I told Scott it was an interesting concept, but we needed to probe on what made it unique in the market."¹¹

McNealy's view is that technology provides far greater value than just enabling people to send and access information. Technology, he suggests, allows people around the world to participate in the world—to search for jobs, to learn, to buy and sell products, to create businesses, or to get better health care. By making it easier for people to access the Internet network, much of which is run on Sun technologies, everyone can better his or her life.

"The company did an incredible amount of soul searching," explains Karen Kahn, Sun's vice president of global communications. "We spent six months talking about the idea, figuring out how it could support our business strategy, and planning how our technologies could help organizations like Oxfam, Bono's ONE Campaign, and the United Nations. We wanted this to be a cause that everyone in the company could get behind, talk about, and be proud of. And it has become just that."¹²

Having this point of view, which Sun calls the “Participation Age,” has simplified Sun’s executive communications, sales conversations, media and analyst relations, and employee communications. People like to talk about the idea, according to Kahn. It’s inspirational yet logical, bold yet pragmatic. The idea doesn’t need to be scripted, messaged, rehearsed, and trained. It provides glue, connecting the voices of multiple Sun executives, yet letting them speak in their own voices.

How does this point of view bring to life Sun’s vision of “everyone and everything participating on the network”? By sharing more—whether ideas, computer code, or technology standards—more people, especially the disadvantaged, are able to get on the network more quickly. The more people participating on the network, the bigger the market for Sun’s network technologies to support all the sharing.

So, all Sun’s talk about sharing adds up! Holding conferences at the United Nations about how organizations can help accelerate the rise of the Participation Age connects to the vision. Funding a Share the Opportunity global giving program to help eliminate the digital divide connects to the vision. Sharing code and resources with other technology companies connects to the vision. Creating a text-messaging program that lets U2 concert fans learn more about the Make Poverty History and ONE campaigns connects to Sun’s vision. The point of view glues the tactics to the vision.

“If you ain’t on the Internet, you aren’t participating in the greatest accumulation of creativity on the planet ever,” McNealy told *Fortune*’s David Kirkpatrick. “Look at Wikipedia, instant messaging, blogging, podcasting, home shopping, telemedicine, home banking, distance learning, voice-over IP. The problem is that three-in-four folks on the earth aren’t there yet. There’s a huge digital divide. Our mission is to provide the infrastructure

that powers the participation age. But our cause is to eliminate the digital divide. That's personal."¹³

A Letter from Scott McNealy¹⁴

In the last twenty-five years, we have been living through the "Information Age," so named because of the impact information technologies have had on our lives. It's a valid label, as the commerce of information today represents a huge percentage of all economic activity in the world. Millions upon millions of people produce information, refine it, store it and distribute it; billions consume it in the same way we consume air, food, and water.

Unfortunately, though, there's one thing wrong with this world view: The Information Age is so last millennium.

Get past it!

Welcome to the "Participation Age." Advances in technology have made it possible for more and more people to connect with each other to participate and to share work flows, to compete for jobs, to purchase goods and services, to learn and create.

Information Age thinking says, "Control the creation and distribution of information and you dominate markets." Participation Age is the antithesis of all that. It's all about access. That access allows for value to be created through networked human beings who share, interact, and solve problems. Because of participation, meaningful content, connections, and relationships are created like never before.

In the Participation Age, there are no arbitrary distinctions between passengers and crew, actors and the audience. Be the one, be both, be everything in between.

Welcome to the revolution.

—Scott

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty started with a belief that challenged assumptions

Dove's belief that there is no one single image of beauty—that it comes in all sizes and shapes—helped the company develop its much talked about Campaign for Real Beauty. Since the launch of the program, the market share for Dove's firming products grew from 7 percent to 13.5 percent in its six largest markets (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands).

Dove's campaign began with a point of view, based on consumer insights that beauty comes in all ages, shapes, and sizes. Beauty is not defined by youthfulness or slenderness or a flawless complexion. There is no one image of beauty.

Taking a contrarian approach to conventional beauty product marketing, Dove decided not to feed off women's insecurities about how they look or to use media images of Barbie doll-like beauty that would only make most of us women feel even worse about our bodies.

Instead, Dove decided to celebrate women's real beauty, with all our bumps and wrinkles. They changed the market conversation and stirred up talk on *Oprah*, *The Today Show*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and among women's everyday conversations. (Heck, we even talked about it at my book club.)

Dove's point of view hit a nerve. And it provided the "glue" for marketing programs. Advertising featured photographs of older women and of six everyday women clad in underwear celebrating their "real curves." Public relations released findings from a study of more than 3,200 women that Dove conducted with Harvard University and the London School

of Economics to learn about women's views on their own beauty. (Only 2 percent of those women considered themselves beautiful.)

Women from the Dove ads appeared on talk shows. Dove created a special Web site encouraging debate and discussion. "When did beauty become limited by age?" they asked. "It's time to think, talk, and learn how to make beauty real again. Join Dove and the debate at campaignforbeauty.com."

"Maybe it's somehow inevitable that marketing, which caused much of the underlying anxiety (about only-thin-is-beautiful body image) in the first place, can offer up a point of view that blithely tries to resolve that anxiety," wrote Rob Walker in *The New York Times Magazine*.¹⁵

The point of view gives the campaign conversational value—whether you've seen the campaign or have simply heard about it. Points of view get attention and stir up talk.

Dove also created the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, which promotes itself as "an agent of change to educate and inspire girls on a wider definition of beauty. Too many girls develop low self-esteem from hang-ups about looks and, consequently, fail to reach their full potential in later life."¹⁶

In the United States, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund and the Girl Scouts of the USA joined together to create the "uniquely ME!" program to promote improved self-esteem among girls age 8 to 14 in the United States and Puerto Rico.

The important thing to note here is that the point of view was rooted in deep beliefs. It challenged beauty-marketing assumptions. It had substance and meaning. It was framed in engaging language and visuals. It was eminently talk-worthy and connected the marketing tactics to the brand's vision and the company's strategy.

Women & Infants Hospital knows what women want—dignity, hope, belonging, and strength

You don't need to be a multibillion-dollar business to use point-of-view conversational marketing. Women & Infants Hospital, founded in 1884 in Providence, Rhode Island, as the Providence Lying-In maternity hospital, has evolved into one of the nation's leading specialty hospitals for women and newborns. The primary teaching affiliate of Brown Medical School for obstetrics, gynecology, and newborn pediatrics, Women & Infants is now the eleventh largest obstetrical service in the country with more than 9,700 deliveries annually.

In a declining market, Women & Infants continues to grow its market share. In a conversation about the hospital's success, May Kernan, the vice president of marketing communications, said:

We're passionate about women's health and well-being, and we believe that all women should be treated with dignity. This deep-seated belief in dignity supersedes everything and guides everything we do.

You can always differentiate a brand on character and beliefs. But the beliefs need to be authentic, deep in your gut. They have to be about who you're trying to serve, not about the organization. It needs to be other-oriented. And you need to bring those beliefs alive in marketing programs that develop lifelong relationships. I think we've built trust with women because we develop a bond with them through our marketing programs. We're providing advice, education, services, and doing it with dignity and a respectful sense of humor.¹⁷

Treating women with dignity shapes the hospital's marketing programs, the design of its hospital rooms, the extra services offered to women—like candlelit dinners for new moms and dads—and, most important, the attitude of everyone who works at the hospital, from the people who staff the registration desks to the nurses and doctors.

The belief in dignity also means that the hospital engages women and listens intently to them. In fact, last year the hospital launched “What Women Want,” a program that asks women—through e-mail, newsletters, and advertising—to share their ideas about what they'd like the hospital to offer. Women are asked: “What makes you happy, what makes you feel accomplished, what brings you comfort or support, what brings you a sense of peace and wellness? What are your causes? What are your secret indulgences? E-mail us to let us know. And we'll work to bring you programs, make connections, and leverage our collective strengths to help give you what you want.”¹⁸

The responses to the program have been overwhelming, says Kernan. “We have appealed to women to engage with us through all of our print communications, paid ads, Web site, events and classes, even suggestion boxes in the lobby. We once used the call center line as our point of contact and to measure impact. We are now using the Women & Infants' Web site. More than sixty thousand unique visitors connect with us through our site, not bad for a local hospital!”¹⁹

Women & Infants Hospital found three overriding patterns in what women want and what dignity means *to them*: a sense of belonging, a strong body and mind, and hope for the future.

In response to the messages it received, Women & Infants Hospital has expanded program offerings at its Centers for Health Education located throughout Rhode Island, created an annual *What Women Want* educational conference, and brought

women's ideas back into the organization, helping to shape services.

The vision of Women & Infants Hospital is “to define the standard of care for women.” The view of treating women with dignity, and engaging them in defining standards of care through “What Women Want,” all lend support to the vision.

“You have to keep up with what women want and continually tweak marketing programs to deliver on the cause,” says Kernan. “But it’s easy to stay passionate when you believe in your cause.”²⁰ This sounds basic. So why don’t more companies have a point of view?

♦ *No one is in charge of creating views that help jump-start conversations.* Business is moving quickly into a world of conversations—more quickly than most marketing organizations are evolving into conversationalists. Companies are just beginning to acknowledge the need to let go of traditional one-way, command-and-control, inform-or-entertain marketing.

♦ *There are too many tactical obsessions and distractions.* A lot of the talk about “marketing as conversations” has been obsessively focused on new tools and tactics like blogs and podcasting. Although those tools have their uses, what really matters is that marketers understand what it takes to have conversations. Conversations involve listening in new ways and having something interesting and meaningful to talk about.

♦ *Too much committee mush and too many alpha fraidy cats are involved.* Many alpha fraidy cats haven’t yet been indoctrinated into the talk world. They still want to control messages and produce things like ads, brochures, and other so-called content. They’re uncomfortable with the dynamic world of uncovering ideas worth talking about—and setting

those ideas loose, where people can talk about them in their own words and in their own style—where ideas may live or die.

Influential alpha fraidy cats claw down a true point of view as soon as it's put on the whiteboard. For this reason, senior-level executives should be involved in the process as early as possible. In addition to voicing their beliefs and perspectives, they can rule on what the company feels confident talking about and how well it helps bigger picture business objectives.

Even if the fraidy cats spend weeks and months polishing the perfectly crafted message, the message might not interest customers or get talked about by the sales reps. An idea or message may be perfect on a piece of paper, but if it's not talk-worthy, it's not a good message.

♦ *“Oops, we forgot to involve communications professionals.”*

Many communications people have deep insights into what makes for genuine, interesting conversations—often deeper than marketing execs. That's because the latter have been trained in traditional “telling” techniques such as advertising, direct mail, and promotions. Few have communications expertise on their staff or people with communications skills in their backgrounds. Without the voice of communications pros, they stay stuck in their old ways.

(FYI: Some of the best communications people come from political backgrounds, where developing points of view and talking with influencers is fundamental to winning and survival.)

**Moving from transactional to
conversational communications**

Without a point of view, communications is a simple transaction. “Here's what I intend to tell you,” “Here's the data to back

it up,” “Now I’ve told you,” “Good-bye.” It is like a financial transaction at a bank. You fill out a deposit slip, hand it to the teller, the teller hands back a receipt, you leave.

Transactional communication, like going into most banks, lets you remain detached and unengaged. It doesn’t help build relationships or richer understanding.

Carly Fiorina is regarded as a superb communicator. She is smart and articulate, able to handle tough questions, and she has great stage presence. However, as CEO of Hewlett Packard, she was a transactional communicator. Her point of view for a while was that acquiring Compaq would be good for shareholders and good for customers. After the acquisition, she didn’t have a point of view. Despite great communications skills, her talk often seemed empty and unstrategic. It didn’t help to build confidence or trust with customers, shareholders, or her board of directors.

Did Fiorina have no beliefs about her industry that would be worth talking about? That seems unlikely. Rather, Fiorina, or her advisers, promoted her as a glamorous CEO celebrity, rather than helping her listen to the industry and talk about those views that were most relevant to customers and shareholders.

As Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap—and Others Don’t*, explained in a *Wall Street Journal* “Manager’s Journal” column, “The really striking point is that Ms. Fiorina had been in the job less than six months before she posed for the cover of *Forbes* as a superhero savior. Yet she hadn’t done anything significant. And now, two years later, she still hasn’t done anything significant.”²¹

Or consider Time Warner CEO Dick Parsons, another intelligent, well-spoken, highly respected executive who exudes confident authority. Yet he often seems at a loss for something to talk about. When *Fortune* magazine writer Stephanie Mehta asked

Parsons about his plan for Time Warner, he responded, “It’s not terribly different from what you see today. We aspire to be the best diversified media company in the world, to create and package the best content and to deliver it in more ways to more people than any other company.”

“He might as well be reading from a script,” wrote Mehta of the conversation.²²

Parsons could have said something like, “Consumers spend twice as much of their personal income on entertainment as they did just five years ago. The market turmoil lies in the fact that *how* consumers want their entertainment and *how* companies have traditionally delivered it is not just a gap—it’s a canyon. That’s what we’re working on.”

Saying something like that wouldn’t have given away strategy or even provided information that might be considered material by the SEC. But it’s more interesting than sounding like a stiff robot with no point of view. It also pulls us into the discussion, helps us know Parsons a bit more as a person, and gives us a sense that he’s perfectly aware of the immense challenges and suggests he may know how to address them.

The absence of a point of view too often leads people to think that there’s a lack of strategy, understanding, or commitment, which of course isn’t always the case.

In today’s conversational world, business can’t default to focusing exclusively on products and services. That’s just not interesting to most customers. Nor is it particularly memorable or interesting to talk about.

Sun’s participation belief incorporates its technology, but it’s not *about* the technology. The company talks about why participating in a global technology infrastructure can end the digital divide and change the world for the better.

Women & Infants Hospital's belief in dignity transcends the services it offers to patients.

Dove's "Campaign for Beauty" doesn't talk about its firming lotions. Instead it jump-starts conversations about women's sense of beauty and self-esteem. And in doing so, it connects women with the brand.

Luther Blount doesn't talk about how great his small cruise ships are. He talks about why a real vacation should be an escape from touristy spots, and about how vacationers should spend their money on getting to their destinations, not on luxury-liner frills.

Do you agree with all these points of view? Probably not. Would you pay attention to them if you were a customer? Probably. Would talking about these ideas influence how you think and feel about the organization? Almost definitely. But would talking with these companies exclusively about their products and services be interesting? No way!

To engage people, we have to be willing to share our beliefs, perspectives, and opinions. Fortunately, these beliefs and views already exist. You don't need to hire an outrageously expensive Madison Avenue advertising firm to "create" them for you.

Chapter 4 shows you seven ways to uncover them.