



The communications ladder

5 steps on the ladder...

...and how to help your customers climb it

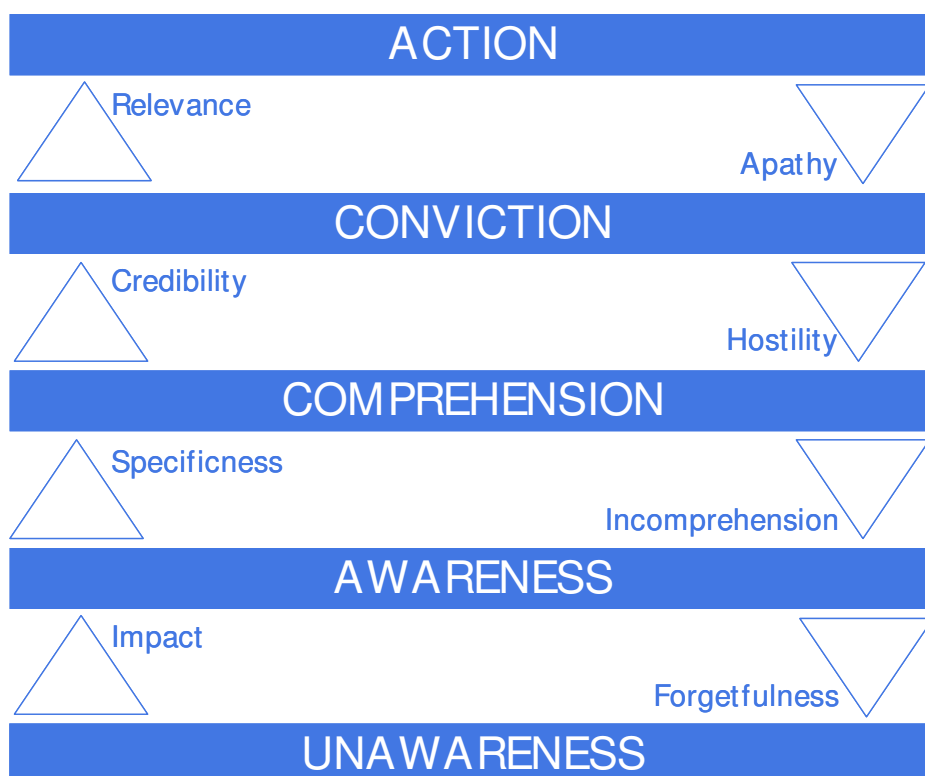
What is the communications ladder?

When your customers make a decision to buy, it's rarely a snap decision. There are some exceptions, of course: impulse purchases or emergency buys. But in most cases you will need to take them through a process of persuasion, a process known in marketing jargon as a 'hierarchy of effects' model, but more straightforwardly demonstrated as the communications ladder.

As advertising expert, David Ogilvy once put it:

“ I don't know who you are.
 I don't know your company.
 I don't know your company's products.
 I don't know what your company stands for.
 I don't know your company's customers.
 I don't know your company's record.
 I don't know your company's reputation.
 Now – what was it you wanted to sell me? ”

And that's the problem that all but the most well-established businesses can face when they start to think about marketing. From a point of anonymity you need to convince people who have never even heard of you to buy from you. It looks like a big leap and it can be daunting. But like any such task, it can be made much easier if you break it down into manageable steps.



Climbing the ladder

But just as the force of gravity works against you as you climb a real ladder, so there are forces at work against your promotional efforts as you climb the communications ladder. Understanding these forces means you can muster your own energy to combat them as you take each step.

1. From Unawareness to Awareness

The first step to take is to make your potential customers aware of who you are and what you do.

The force you are fighting here is **Forgetfulness**. Until you are well-established in the front of your customers' minds, you run the risk of them forgetting about you – even at the crucial moment when they need to buy your product or service.

Your weapon against this force is **Impact**. The principle at stake is “out of sight, out of mind.” This is why a drip-feed of press stories might actually have a better impact than one large splash; if they forget about you after the splash, then its impact will have been minimal. Similarly, a series of smaller advertisements, placed regularly in the same publication, will have a better impact over time than a one-off, larger ad.

2. From Awareness to Comprehension

It is not enough for your potential customers to simply be aware of you. They have to understand who you are, what you do, what benefits you offer and what you stand for.

Here, the force of **Incomprehension** is acting against you. If your product or service is new to market, you will face the problem of widespread lack of understanding of what it actually does. Where it is one of many in the market, your prospective customers might not understand why they should choose yours rather than your competitors'.

Against this force, you need to apply the counter-force of **Specificness**. Generalities will not help you here. Neither will bland statements about quality of service; technical jargon that your customers don't understand; and descriptions about what your product *is* rather than what it *does*. Rather you need to clearly identify the benefits that your customers will see once they buy from you.

Climbing the ladder

3. From Comprehension to Conviction

So, your target market is aware of you and understands what you do, and why it would be in their interests to buy from you. Now you have to move them to the next step where they will not only *know*, but will also *believe* that they should be your customers.

At this point more emotional factors come into play. The force you could find yourself working against is **Hostility**. Not in the sense that your potential customers are about to start a hate campaign, but hostility towards the idea that they need your product, or that you are better than their usual supplier, or that they should change their ingrained habits.

To counter this, you need to demonstrate your **Credibility**. Although this might mean providing facts and figures to prove your case, it also means building trust and assuring them of your reliability.

4. From Conviction to Action

The last step on the ladder is the one that finally creates a customer; the step where the convinced prospect takes the action of buying from you.

The final barrier you have to break, now that you have ensured they understand and believe in your business, is that of **Apathy**. Quite simply there is a difference between believing you *should* do something and actually *doing* it.

At this point you need to stress the **Relevance** of your product or service to their particular circumstances. Again, you need to focus on the benefits to them; and the benefits of buying now.

Understanding the process that your customers go through to reach the point where they make the decision to buy from you will help you understand how to plan a promotional campaign, using this process as a framework for choosing which promotional techniques you should use and which will be better at which stage.

As a general rule, broadcast techniques such as advertising and PR work well to generate awareness and more personalised methods work better on the higher rungs. But you might also find that a powerful direct sales letter with a strong call to action can take you up all the steps by itself.

Clarity Marketing Ltd. provides promotional planning services to small and medium sized businesses. If you would like some help developing your campaign, contact us on 0115 964 8222 or enquiries@clarity-in-communication.com.