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Mission Possible: Key Elements To A Good Mission Planning Statement

By John M. Collard

When was the last time you read your company's mission statement? What did it say to you? More importantly, what does it really convey to others? Thousands of businesses have mission statements, but few have a mission statement that serves their intended purpose.

Where is your company going? What does it do? These words are supposed to inspire and guide you and your employees every working day and hour, whether your business is coming up ahead, lagging behind, or just sitting in the middle.

Yet all too often, a mission statement comes up short; it may say something nebulous such as, "The mission of our company is to provide excellence and quality for all of our customers." While these ideals are fine, they are basically expected. Most managers acknowledge that the company that they work for is going to want to provide excellence and quality for all of its customers. The words do not give constructive guidance to management and professionals in their daily work lives. And a customer reading such a plaque over the receptionist's desk doesn't really get a feel for what the com-

pany does or why it is different from its competitors.

The real question is, *Where are you going? What is your Mission?* When this question isn't adequately answered, the company is off to a bad start. The management team may have signed a death warrant, without knowing it. When the 'rudder' is left untended, only fate can guide the course of the company, and usually you will end up on 'troubles reef,' wondering why.

Set a course with a high degree of probability of successful accomplishment, within allotted time frames, and stick to it. Setting such a course is an arduous task. It means work . . . and a lot of it. It means risk . . . someone, the leadership, needs to state which direction the company is to go in. Yes, you must make a decision, and more importantly, have the conviction to follow it, and convince others to as well.

The role of the mission statement is to provide the planning team, management, employees, customers—all stakeholders—with an understanding of future growth directions. Somewhere in its

body, it should include six components as highlighted below:

Let's look at a template of how to build a company Mission Statement. You fill in the blanks where the print in italics exists.

Our mission is to provide (*Specific Market Segments*) **with** (*Some Product or Service*) **because the** (*Customer Need*) **can be satisfied.** This begins to say something. It begins to address the needs of the customer, why he buys, when, and where he buys.

Only after developing a comprehensive matrix describing the relationship of these six elements, for each product or service that you offer, will you have properly completed your work. Surprise! You have a statement of direction that has substance; one that, if executed, can produce added value for the company. Some believe that developing a mission statement is the first step in the strategic planning process; some believe it to be the last, while others ignore both altogether. Running a company without proper focus is a lot like driving while wearing a blindfold . . . in either case you are predestined to 'an abrupt end.'

MISSION statement

Mission Statement Elements

Product/Service Definition -- What do we do or provide? We will offer (specific products/services) that are positioned to (special benefit to be gained) and will be focused at (definition by line, scope, or positioning).

Products and services should be defined in terms of how they are positioned to serve and benefit the customer. Include breadth of product line, attributes, price, quality level, product classification, and so on. How will you contribute to fulfilling the customer's mission? Limit the extent of the offering to focus on what you do very well.

Technology -- How will we deliver our services? We will use (define technologies to be utilized) to provide our services.

Choose which technologies, or combination thereof, you understand and are capable of offering; this is critical to setting an effective business development strategy. Here is where you begin to set the company's product apart from the competition, and from areas of business where you don't belong. Actually, providing an array of multiple technologies can involve increased investment, and a risk of diluting effectiveness, commitment, and impact. Conversely, complimentary technologies can allow skill sharing economies of scale, controlled flexibility, and unique benefit to your customers.

Levels of Vertical Integration -- How much will we do? We will provide (stages in the life cycle offering) designed to support (degree of penetration to satisfy the customer's entire need). You can't be all things to all people, resources

will not allow it, not to mention, it's just plain not good business sense.

Define which elements of the customer's requirement will, and will not, be satisfied. This effort will indicate where you need to develop new products, seek partners, or avoid competing. Plan how products and services will support changing customer dynamics, and how you will stay abreast.

Generic Customer Need -- Why will they buy? Our products and services will satisfy (what important customer demand or necessity).

What is the customer trying to accomplish? By defining generic needs versus 'today hurts,' you can identify future growth directions, which have a higher probability of being funded and carried out. If the need is greater than you can currently offer, you clearly define areas where you may want to augment capabilities, or where strategic alliances may be necessary.

Statement of Direction or Market Definition -- Who will we sell to? Where are they located? Our main thrust will be dedicated to the (market definition or segmentation).

The key here is to focus on who you are, and as importantly, are not, going to aim your efforts at marketing. Define the scope of the market. Which specific customer groups or segments and geographic territory will be served or not served? This section enables the development of different strategies necessary to address multiple directions, yet accommodate your common goals.

Distinct Competencies -- Why will they buy from us? We will develop and maintain unequivocal qualifications in (which areas), which will yield (specific capabilities). We commit to (level of expertise to set us apart) to remain recognized as an expert in (what we do better than anyone else).

Define and focus on those special abilities, which set you apart from the masses. Competencies will command the higher profit and cash flow margins. This is the most important thinking of all. What do you accomplish that the competition cannot? What areas do you need to invest in, to maintain your advantage? Address the level to which the distinct competence will differentiate you, and be recognized by the customer. Discuss how to bring these competencies to the customers attention.

Remember, the value of this exercise is in the process. Once you decide, then many open questions often become answered.



About the Author

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