



By TERRY L. MATHIS

## Safety can learn from marketing

### What's your strategy for superior safety performance?

The Senior VP of Marketing at a Fortune 500 company told me he wanted his customers to feel like buying his product was the most logical decision they had ever made. He wanted his marketing research to ensure that his product would exactly fulfill its purpose and both meet and exceed the customer's specific needs. He went on to describe how he wanted his follow-up service to his product to reinforce the buying decision at every level. He wanted his brand to become the symbol of satisfaction and to create customer loyalty. This vision and these goals had been the foundation on which he built his company's marketing strategy.

#### Safety's control game

Consider the difference between this approach and the average corporate safety program. Many companies still view their workers as safety's problem rather than its customer. The goal is control, not marketing. Risk must be controlled through a hierarchical matrix addressing conditions, worker behavior and combinations of the two. Risk is eliminated or reduced conditionally through engineering and design, and worker behavior is controlled through the enforcement of rules and procedures. The safety department builds its product with no marketing research or customer input. Little or no thought is given to branding the safety effort. Compliance replaces customer satisfaction and there is no reinforcing of the buying decision to be safe other than discipline. Safety culture is often viewed simply as an informal consensus that somehow results in peer-to-peer enforcement of rules and activities is mistakenly labeled as a safety strategy.

Safety is an organizational goal that requires its own true vision and strategy. This does not require new technologies or methods. Marketing is



already doing it. Safety can simply look, learn and duplicate. Just as marketing targets the needs of external customers, safety can target the needs of internal customers. Those internal customers can be studied and asked about their needs and what they view as valuable to their own safety performance. Participation in a safety program can become a logical and rewarding experience reinforced on a regular basis. Safety can have a brand that fosters teamwork and loyalty. Safety culture can go above and beyond reinforcing compliance and truly elicit pride and discretionary effort from the workforce.

#### The first step

The first step is a change in mind-set at the leadership level. Organizational and corporate leaders can still delegate the busywork of safety, but not the strategy. This means that safety needs a strategy, and that a bundle of programs is not the same thing. Programmatic thinking has dominated the mainstream of safety for decades. When lagging indicators go beyond acceptable levels, new programs are added. The thinking seems to be if results are not acceptable, we must not be doing enough. So the more-is-better philosophy is adopted. This entire train of thought is almost the

antithesis of strategy.

Leaders need to apply strategic marketing to safety. It's critical this is done at the top level of the organization. If the creation of a safety strategy is delegated to safety professionals, there is no guarantee the safety strategy will not directly conflict with the business strategy. Some think this conflict is inevitable, that safety and production are natural enemies. But recent studies refute this view. The best companies in safety are regularly the best producers, and vice versa. A true safety strategy

supports, rather than conflicts with, the business strategy. The risks inherent in the production process are addressed and factored into both the business and safety strategies.

A successful marriage of business and safety strategies can also eliminate the conflict workers face when their production boss and their safety boss set different priorities for them. Workers who juggle conflicting priorities are seldom as productive as possible. Clarifying the relationship between these two high priorities into a single value with a well-defined strategy focuses worker attention and efforts toward what the organization really wants.

#### A profound difference

A strategic approach to safety almost always improves safety performance. Strategy is a plan to win. Programmatic safety is a plan to avoid failure. There is a profound difference here. Winning is motivational. The pursuit of victory creates a level of effort and energy not attainable through avoidance goals. A recent study asserted that visible progress toward a goal was one of the highest motivators in business. Defining safety success and strategically working toward it is a giant step in the right direction for organizations that have historically set goals to fail less and constantly bombarded workers with failure metrics like recordable rates and lost-time statistics. Many organizations have never truly envisioned nor defined safety success other than as the lack of safety failure. Doing so tends to re-energize safety efforts and give them new meaning and direction.

Safety is one of the most prominent efforts with internal customers that benefit from strategy, but it's not the only one. Many other departments and functions service internal customers whose needs might be better met and whose value to the organization might be improved with the right strategy. Exploring these opportunities is the theme of the new book, "Inside Strategy: Value Creation From Within Your Organization." Applying this thinking to safety can potentially revolutionize value addition at each step of a process. The cost of doing so is absolutely minimal since the expertise already exists within the organizational or corporate structure. Plagiarism of someone else's work is a crime. Stealing strategy from your own marketing department could be a stroke of genius. **ISHN**

**Terry Mathis**, Founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. Terry can be reached at [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com) or 800-395-1347.

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Patrick Rhinehart, CSP, ASP, MS  
CSU Graduate, Occupational Safety and Health  
Manager of Compliance



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