

## On Defining a Compelling Benefit

“When software marketers talk about product benefits, they like to be all things to all people,” says marketing consultant Tracy Weatherby. “The trouble is, they usually end up stressing very generic benefits—productivity, cost savings, higher profits—that aren’t tangible, crisis issues for most people. So the sale ends up at the very bottom of the buyer’s problem-solving list.”

In fact, she says, “the more tangible you make the benefit, the easier the sale. When buyers hear the benefit, their reaction should be ‘aha!’”

Creating a compelling benefit statement is largely a matter of listening carefully for specific themes that seem to motivate customers, she points out. “Often, different market segments respond to different benefits, so you may need to create a whole set of messages—but it’s usually worthwhile.”

Her advice:

- **First, talk to the sales force:** Sales reps often disregard “official” marketing messages because they’ve discovered a stronger benefit statement that really clicks with the customer, Weatherby notes. “The benefit they’re selling may not have anything to do with the product itself,” she adds. “Sometimes a roster of marquee customers or the company’s financial strength are more compelling to customers than the feature set of a me-too product.”
- **Conduct customer interviews:** Not surprisingly, customers provide the best feedback about sales messages. “Be sure to go beyond what sold them in the first place,” Weatherby advises. “Many people buy a product for one reason, but once they start using it, they start to see an entirely different benefit. You’ll probably also find that there are users who are being driven absolutely nuts by something in the product—that’s important, too.”
- **Check out the competition:** “If the competition doesn’t stress an obvious benefit, it may be that they couldn’t get traction with that message and switched to something more compelling.” It’s also “illuminating” to interview prospects who ultimately chose a competitor, she adds. “Price may be one reason, but there’s almost always a bigger question of benefits as well.”
- **Match benefits to product features:** Once it’s clear *why* customers buy, the next step is to take a “hard look” at how well the product itself delivers on this benefit. “It’s not always good news,” Weatherby points out: “Sometimes the benefit depends on a small subset of the whole feature set, or it’s something that a competitor can easily match.” However, knowing what tangible benefits actually drive sales can help guide future development, she notes.
- **Make it dramatic:** “The last step in the process is to bring in the marcom people to turn the benefit statement into a punchy, exciting message that clearly positions the product,” says Weatherby. Be sure the creative staff understands the research behind the benefits message, she adds. “You don’t want them to get creative at the expense of the original idea.”

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