



“WHY SHOULD I CHOOSE YOU?”

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*How to Differentiate your Firm  
in a Crowded Marketplace*

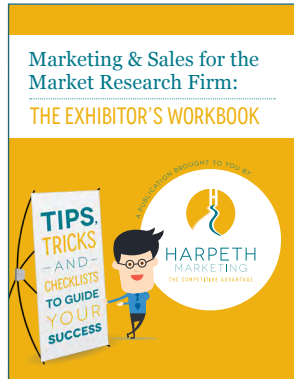
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# “WHY SHOULD I CHOOSE YOU?”

## *How to Differentiate your Firm in a Crowded Marketplace*

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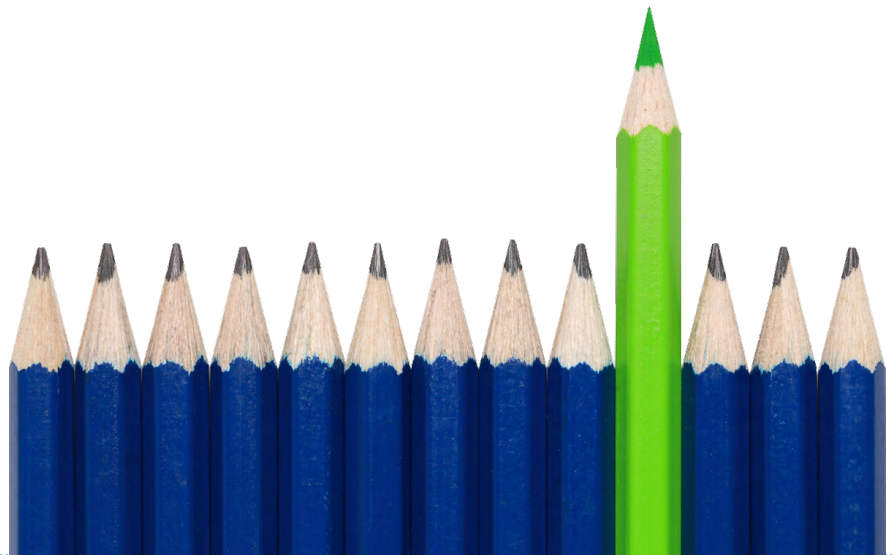
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## “DIFFERENTIATE OR DIE” – *Yeah, that’s about right!*

Imagine that a research buyer for a Fortune 500 CPG company is in need of a new market research agency. After browsing through directories and searching out recommendations from co-workers and industry colleagues, the first thing she does is to visit the firms’ websites... only to discover that the description and capabilities of every firm is almost identical. The words may be different... but the message is the same.

### **So, how does she choose?**

Or more to the point... *what can YOU do to help her decide?*

The answer is simple... but it isn’t easy. As someone responsible for revenue growth at your firm, you have to put in place those things that will help your firm to stand out... that capture your prospects’ attention and their imagination. That is, **you have to determine how to differentiate your firm from other very similar firms in the marketplace.**

### *Easier said than done!*

The purpose of this eBook is to help you understand differentiation and why it’s important, to layout a process for helping you discover your Points of Differentiation (PODs) and to present some examples of how other firms are differentiating their businesses. We hope you find it helpful.



Thanks for your interest,  
Steve Henke, Founder & President  
Harpeth Marketing  
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### *They really said it...*

Following are randomly selected verbatim comments taken from a number of websites from firms in our industry. See if what they're saying sounds familiar?

*"Every project that comes through our doors gets senior-level attention every step of the way."*

*"[We are] committed to working with clients to identify the right solutions to their specific challenges."*

*"[We are] a full-service custom research firm that develops long-term partnerships with its clients."*

*"We partner with you to develop a truly tailored research solution. Our research experts listen carefully to your needs, design research strategies that lead to actionable and meaningful insights, and go above and beyond to address any issues throughout the project."*

*"Senior staff plays an active role on each assignment – writing questionnaires, examining results, and making presentations – to lend expertise and ensure quality at every stage."*

## WHAT MOST FIRMS SAY WHEN ASKED HOW THEY'RE DIFFERENT... *and why they're wrong.*

When I was thinking about launching Harpeth Marketing back in early 2012, one of the first things I did was to reach out to senior-level contacts across the market research industry and talk to them about how they grow their businesses. A little 'due diligence,' if you will.

We discussed marketing, sales and, most interestingly, what they were doing to differentiate their firms from their competitors. Why was this the most interesting topic? Because every single one of them said the following (and used nearly the same words)...

*"We do great work... we have great people... and we really take care of our clients."*

**Sound familiar?!** Is that how you would respond to that question?

Try this little exercise... take a look at the website of your top three or four direct competitors. Read through their pages titled "About Us", "How We're Different" or "Why Hire Us." Then read through those same pages on your website. I'd be willing to bet that your words deliver a message that's an awful lot like theirs.

Overused phrases like, "we consult with our clients," "senior level involvement," "partnering" and "actionable insights" are everywhere! And with seemingly everyone using them, their value is really diluted. Sort of depressing, isn't it? See the sidebar for some real-world examples.

Let's be clear... this is not just an issue for research firms. This "sea of sameness" also enjoys the company of panel providers, focus group facilities, technology vendors and so on.

*"We consult with Clients to translate what consumers say and do into insights and actionable recommendations."*

*"We take the time to understand your unique insight need, and propose a customized research plan to address that need."*

*"We provide actionable insights that help you make impactful decisions that drive growth."*

*"What's more, [our] principals are members of the project team as consultants and advisors. You can count on their input and oversight at every stage of the project and that you will have full benefit of their extensive experience."*

*"And, although we pay great attention to detail, we never lose sight of your big picture. Our goal is to be your business partner, not just a research vendor."*

*"[Our] experienced team of market research consultants are committed to answering our clients' most pressing marketing and business questions."*

*"We know how to truly listen and collaborate—so you gain a partner, not just a vendor."*

Here's the dilemma... if every firm is saying the same thing – and even if it's true – then no firm is truly different from any other! Which, sadly, is the perception out in the marketplace. The fact is, "good people, good work and good service" are simply the price of admission into our industry.

*To BE different... you have to DO different.*



*"Without question, within the first minute of every sales prospect discussion, the point of differentiation comes up... and how you answer that question can make the difference between winning and losing the project."*

Merrill Dubrow, President & CEO, M/A/R/C Research

## Unique Data-Gathering Tool

It is often said that you can learn more by *failing* than you can by *succeeding*... and one way to take advantage of this 'learning opportunity' is to conduct a survey of clients that you've lost. Reach out to them with questions like, "Why did you leave us?," "What could we have done better?" and "Who do you use now and why?" *Want to really maximize this experience? Do it in person, rather than with email and an online survey. You never know where the conversation might lead.*

## HOW TO DETERMINE YOUR POINTS OF DIFFERENTIATION *(hint: Don't guess!)*

Determining your true PODs (Points of Differentiation) – or what you *want* them to be – is not easy. It requires a thorough understanding of your current business environment, competitors and clients. And figuring it (or them) out is a *process*.

Like any important business decision, you need to base it on information. You work in the research industry... time to do a little for yourself.

### Step 1 – Gather the data

Like any research project, you have to surround yourself with information (data *and* perceptions) that will form the basis of your decision-making. This should include:

- ❑ Understanding what's happening in the Market Research industry.
- ❑ Understanding what's going on in the Vertical industries you serve.
- ❑ Monitoring what's happening with your clients, prospective clients and competitors.
- ❑ Being clear on what's happening inside the walls of your firm – your people and processes.

### *Some key data-gathering tools include:*

- ❑ Joining targeted MR industry associations and LinkedIn groups; subscribing to the right magazines, blogs and web portals.
- ❑ Joining targeted Vertical industry associations and LinkedIn groups; subscribing to the right magazines, blogs and web portals.
- ❑ Using web search tools (e.g. Google Alerts) to keep you on top of the latest information.
- ❑ Reviewing your financials: Who is buying from you? / What are they buying? / Who are your best clients... and why? / Etc.
- ❑ Conducting Client surveys, not just after projects, but also bigger picture: Why did you hire us the first time? / What, if anything, do we do that's unique? / What other firms do you use and why?
- ❑ Initiating an internal SWOT Analysis with you employees (all levels, all departments).
- ❑ Doing a Competitor analysis.

## Step 2 – The Analysis

With all of the data above at your fingertips, look for any recurring themes that keep bubbling to the surface. Now, answer two key questions, the answers to which will help to define your PODs....

- ❑ What **opportunities** have presented themselves that, if we take advantage of, would help to differentiate our firm?  
*E.g. “Seniors are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population... and several clients have asked us about our capabilities there. Perhaps we should focus on conducting research across that demographic.”*
- ❑ What **problems** exist (in our firm, among our clients, in the industries we serve) that, if we were to solve, would help to differentiate our firm?  
*E.g. “The biggest complaint we hear from our clients is how long it takes to recruit focus group participants. Can we change our processes to dramatically shorten that time frame?”*

## Step 3 – A Final Check

Even after you’ve done your research and analysis and decided on your PODs, there are three remaining questions that **MUST** be answered to ensure that your decisions on how to differentiate your firm are the *right* ones:

### 1. How *truly* different are your choices from what your competitors are doing?

Do as thorough a comparison as you can to see how your ideas *really* stack up. On the scale of ‘extremely similar’ to ‘dramatically different’... you **MUST** be as close as possible to the latter. A ‘little’ or ‘somewhat’ different just isn’t good enough.

### 2. How much will your clients/prospects *care* about your Point(s) of Differentiation?

Just because *you* think it’s a good idea... doesn’t mean your clients (and prospective clients) will feel the same way. Before you commit all of your resources to this new differentiation strategy, get some outside feedback. Make sure you’re moving in the right direction. **Note:** As part of this, make sure that your PODs aren’t just seen as *important*, but also as **believable**.

### 3. Does this work from a business perspective?

One final question before you pull the trigger... make sure your POD makes sense for your business. E.g. Can you afford it? / Can you easily communicate it? / Will you be profitable after you do it? Make sure to run some “what ifs” before you make the final commitment.





*“The reality is no one recruiting agency is truly unique from its competitors so the points of differentiation shift to solving the most common points of pain for clients, which tend to be deadlines and budgets.”*

Chris Lee, President,  
MedQuery, Inc.

## 12 REAL-WORLD WAYS TO DIFFERENTIATE YOUR FIRM

While there is no magic bullet, following are 12 ideas that we’ve seen used across our industry (and others) that we hope will be a catalyst to jump-start your thinking and discussions about how you might differentiate your firm.

Importantly, we’re not suggesting that you need to do all or most of these. Pick one (or two) and do it really, really well to begin to build your Points of Differentiation.

### The Big 4:

We’re calling these the “Big 4” because they are the ones we see most often. The opportunity is in finding your specific niche within one of these categories and “owning it.” But don’t just pick one “out of a hat”... build on where you have already had proven success.

1. **Industry focus:** Establish and build an expertise in a certain vertical industry (e.g. automotive, healthcare, technology, etc.).
2. **Methodology focus:** Become the go-to firm for certain types of work – e.g. online qualitative, ethnographies, mobile surveys, etc.
3. **Application focus:** Specialize in certain research applications, like new product research, patient satisfaction surveys, website usability, etc.
4. **Market focus:** Somewhat similar in nature to an industry focus, when you focus on a particular market segment (e.g. Hispanics, Women, Children, Physicians, etc.), you can position your firm with a unique expertise that others won’t have.

To differentiate your firm even more, think about where more than one of the Big 4 intersect. As an example, you could decide to specialize in patient satisfaction (application) surveys (methodology) for rural hospitals (industry).

### 8 Other ideas:

1. **Technology advantage:** Are you an “early adopter” of technology? If so, be the first one on the block to get and use it – positioning your firm as very innovative. This isn’t just about research technology (e.g. bulletin board focus groups), but technology that supports other parts of the research processes, as well.



*“As the competition for business continues to accelerate, finding what differentiates us from our competitors becomes more and more crucial. And when clients ask — and they always do — the answer has to be something that makes their eyes light up with comprehension. And that is not easy!”*

Kathy Doyle, Founder & President, Doyle Research Associates

**2. With unique operational processes:**

- A survey is a survey is a survey... but if you can recruit to it, distribute it, process it or report on it an interesting and unique way, you'll stand out from the other average survey providers. This applies to most popular research methodologies.
- **With speed:** Of the three components of business (better, faster, cheaper), which is most important in our industry? Everyone we've spoken with over the years immediately points to *speed*. Can you re-engineer your processes to be the “fast” research firm – in all aspects of the client engagement?
- **With your level of service.** We all like to think that we deliver a high level of service to each and every client. And maybe we do. But what if there was a level above even that? Think Nordstrom vs. Sears vs. Wal-Mart.

**3. With your size & scope:** Take a look at the top of the Honomichl 50. Many of those firms don't necessarily have a ‘specialty’ or ‘focus.’ But what they do have is size and scope... they can do pretty much *anything* for *anybody anywhere* in the world at any time. And that's different.

**4. With your ‘first touch’:** How do you respond when a new, prospective client submits an RFP? Probably like everyone else... nice email thank you, maybe a brief follow-up phone call and then a fairly standard bid package. But what if you could blow them away at this phase? What if your responsiveness, professionalism and deliverables were so different that your competitors didn't stand a chance? Remember, you only get one chance to make a first impression.

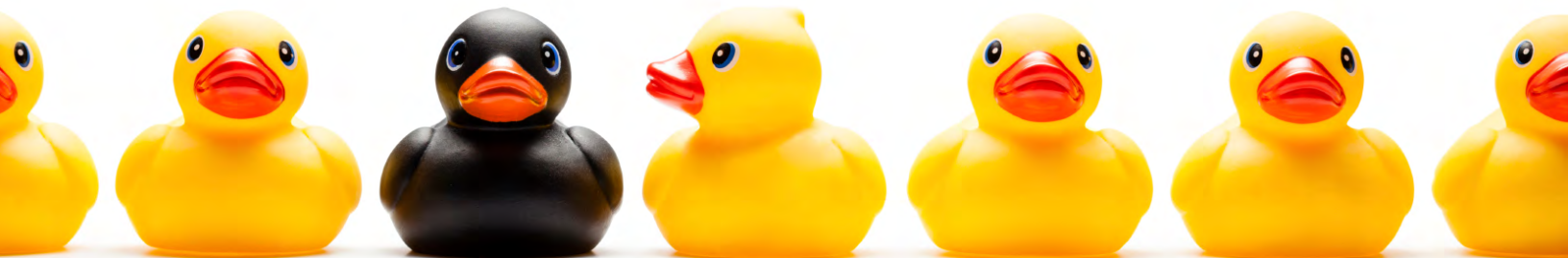


*“Differentiation in the market research industry starts with the hiring process... differentiate with your employees: they will be your biggest asset in differentiating you from the competition.”*

Brett Watkins, President,  
L&E Research

5. **Who you target:** Everybody wants to work with P&G, Coca-Cola, Nike, etc. Not only are you competing with scores of other firms on every bid, it's incredibly price sensitive and the nod often goes to one of the “big boys.” But who's calling on the mid-tier buyers, not the Fortune 50, but the Fortune 5000. It's not nearly as competitive and much easier to build ‘relationships.’
6. **With a unique business model:** There are a handful of firms that have sprung up in the past few years that were built very differently from the ground up. Their structure and their way of conducting business are very different than traditional firms. Are they better, faster or cheaper? Maybe, maybe not... but they are genuinely different.
7. **Being first to market:** Being first to market has always been a competitive advantage... first with a new technology, a new methodology a new pricing model, etc. The key is a strong promotional effort – so everyone *knows* you're first.
8. **With your marketing:**
  - Flip through the pages of any research publication. Notice anything? Most of the ads are pretty much the same... and are pretty boring. Stand out from the crowd with unique, interesting or thought-provoking marketing.
  - We work in a knowledge industry. You can help to “prove” yours by *consistently* sharing some of it through articles, blog posts, white papers, eBooks, presentations, etc.
  - Having a well-trained, professional sales person/team... when many of your competitors do not. It's a very direct way to proactively build relationships.

I hope this list triggers some ideas that serve as a springboard for your internal discussions and planning. Remember... not a single one of them is easy – which is why so few firms do it.



*“There are thousands of market research firms all vying for the same percentage of a percentage of a marketing research budget and we all offer the same methodologies and approaches, so the only way clients can choose ‘firm A’ over ‘firm B’ is their unique value proposition... What will you deliver that no other firm can? Answering that question and creating a differentiation point that permeates all parts of your sales process and research execution is a must in order for research firms to win bids and succeed.”*

Mario X. Carrasco, Managing Partner, ThinkNow Research

## CONCLUSION: WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU'VE CHOSEN YOUR PODS

Congratulations! You've put in the time and the brain power to determine how you want to differentiate your firm in the marketplace.

*Now what?*

Now you need to *live* it. Build your marketing around it, adjust your operations to support it, train your employees on it, etc. Then once you do that, you'll no longer be swimming in a crowded ocean... you'll have a clear, blue pool all to yourself.

### Internally

- Start with *sharing the vision* with your staff. Make sure every employee understands what you're doing, *why* you're doing it and *how* they will be impacted.
- Make sure your *operational processes* are brought up to speed. You've got to be able to deliver on the new promises you'll be making with your PODs.
- If additional *training* is needed, make sure it's implemented before you “go to market.”

### Externally

- *Shout it from the rooftops!* If you've gone through this whole process and found your true Point(s) of Differentiation... it/they should become the focus of your website, your capabilities presentation, your advertisements, your content and so on. Any message to the marketplace that focuses on anything else will water-down your difference.
- And finally...*learn to say “no.”* Once you decide to be different, you can never go back to being the same as everyone else. For example, if you decide to specialize in research for the automotive industry and someone comes to you with a project in the technology space... you've got to say ‘no.’ If not, you'll be right back to where you started – that is, being no different than anyone else!

*“Building a brand is about  
building a unique meaning.  
Without a unique meaning, a  
brand is simply a title.”*

Jim Bryson, CEO,  
20|20 Research, Inc.



*“When a firm’s core business  
is to be a “jack of all trades”  
– developing a concise way  
to position and describe your  
firm becomes very difficult.”*

Paul Metz, Executive Vice  
President, C+R Research

## WE DON'T JUST TALK THE TALK, WE ALSO WALK THE WALK.

At the risk of coming across as “salesy” – which is not my intention – I wanted to share Harpeth Marketing’s Points of Differentiation as an example of how this might work for your firm.

- **Industry focus:** Most importantly, from Day 1, we have focused on the Market Research industry... and nothing else. That focus has helped us to build a reputation in the industry as a go-to resource and knowledgeable vendor.
- **Unique service offerings:** First, we are one of only a handful of marketing & sales consultants in the MR industry. Within that, we are one of the very few with an emphasis on providing outsourced marketing services. And finally, it’s the mix of services we provide – content development, email and social media marketing and telephone sales – that is a POD for us.
- **With our content:** We have a very broad marketing plan in place... but the cornerstone of it is our content. We tweet daily, blog weekly, write articles monthly and publish 2-3 eBooks each year. Not only does that help to position us as industry experts, but everything we do also provides a blueprint that shows our clients how it can work.

### A Final Thought...

Think about it this way... if you and your competitors are all [perceived as] about the same, then on what criteria will the research buyer base her decision? There’s only one thing left... price. And while you might occasionally win on price... more often, you will lose on it. There is no long-term value to your business when ‘price’ is your only Point of Differentiation.

So, make the commitment right now to find something that genuinely sets your business apart from the others. Something that will bring real value to your business and in doing so, will help you to win more projects.

*Good luck!*

WHY SHOULD I CHOOSE YOU?

“FOCUS ON WHAT YOU DO BEST...  
LEAVE THE MARKETING TO US.”



# HARPETH MARKETING

*Marketing for the Market Research Industry*

“FOCUS ON WHAT YOU DO BEST...  
LEAVE THE MARKETING TO US.”

At Harpeth Marketing, we provide **Outsourced Marketing Services** to firms in the market research industry that don't have the expertise, staff or the time to do it themselves.

With an emphasis on lead generation, lead nurturing and positioning our clients in the marketplace, our services include content development (blog posts, articles, case studies, eBooks, webinar decks, etc.), email marketing, social media marketing, telephone sales and more. We work with our clients to plan the program, then we execute & manage the activities and report back on a monthly basis – in essence, serving as part of their Marketing Department.

Go to [www.HarpethOutsourcing.com](http://www.HarpethOutsourcing.com) to learn more.

For those clients that need third-party help with strategy or planning, we also offer a variety of Coaching & Consulting Services... from full-blown marketing & sales plan development to audits, competitive analyses and 1-on-1 coaching.

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