

The fundamental difference . . .

How about a simple test to start your day? There will be no grades . . .

Here are the vision and mission statements handed to me when I began working with one of my clients a few years ago. After you read them, I'll ask you a question.

"OUR VISION: We are a nationally recognized, compassionate organization offering quality human services through disciplined growth and community partnerships.

"OUR MISSION: We enhance quality of life by providing comprehensive services that empower people to maintain their independence and dignity."

Now for the quiz: What does the organization do and who are its clients?

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More than one nonprofit or social enterprise Board member has approached me after a briefing session or retreat, perplexed by the same topic.

Their questions frequently come down to this: What is the difference between vision and mission -- and why is the difference so important?

Some organizations have both a vision statement and a mission statement. Some have only one statement and try to cover the waterfront. But most make a fundamental mistake: They think their vision statement should be about themselves.

At first glance the vision and mission statements reprinted above contain lots of wonderful concepts. But let's look closer.

A vision statement should answer the question "How do we want the world to change?" and a mission statement should answer the question "What will we do to change it?"

Instead, my client's vision statement was completely inner-directed. It expressed dreams for the organization -- but it should have been about the world in which the organization exists and the people it serves, not the organization itself.

In fact, a vision statement will often be shared by many organizations. Think about it as the roof of a temple supported by multiple pillars, each pillar the mission statement for a different organization, all working toward the same vision.

But that still leaves open the question of *why* a vision statement should be outer-directed, and the answer, I believe, resides in the very definition of marketing itself.

If you start with your products, services or programs, then go looking for customers, you are trying to *push* your way into the market. It works, sometimes, but not for long.

But if you start with a group of customers, then develop products, services or programs to meet their needs, you are being *pulled* into the market. No nonprofit or social enterprise can succeed for long unless it understands what its customers and clients really want, and that means the mantra is simple: “Always start with *them!*”

Now translate that into what happens if your vision statement is inner-directed. You’re not starting with the people you serve -- you’re starting with your own ambitions. Here there be dragons.

A vision should inspire an organization to change the world. It should be a call to action that mobilizes support and triggers quantum leaps. A simple, powerful statement that opens hearts and wallets.

But stakeholders won’t be inspired by a vision that’s inner-directed.

The Alliance for Children & Families, one of the country’s leading nonprofit associations, clearly understands the difference between vision and mission. Under the leadership of former President and CEO Peter Goldberg and its Board of Directors, the Alliance a few years ago approved new wording for both. The vision? “A healthy society and strong communities for all children and families.”

Here are some other examples of strong vision statements:

- “We envision the day when everyone in the world can take a safe drink of water.” (*Water Partners International, now known as water.org*)
- “A global community of teenage entrepreneurs sharing a common purpose: To make the world a better place.” (*SAGE: Students for the Advancement of Global Entrepreneurship*)
- “Ensure that one day all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.” (*Teach for America*)

Now *those* are visions we *all* can share.

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My client’s original mission statement actually did contain some hopes for the people it serves -- “independence,” “dignity,” “quality of life.” And, after a lengthy brainstorming and wordsmithing process, here’s what we came up with as the organization’s new vision statement:

“We envision a world in which people grow older with dignity, control their destinies and live independently as long as possible.”

We also created a new mission statement that defined exactly what my client would be doing to help achieve that vision:

“Our mission is to be (name of state)’s premier provider of early onset Alzheimer’s care for individuals and their families.”

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This entry in “Jerr’s Journal” is adapted in part from an essay in Boschee on Marketing. The entire book can be downloaded free of charge at http://socialent.org/Publications_Podcasts.htm.