

Mission Statements

Magpie Consulting



Mission Statements

Every company is expected to have a mission statement, but there is little agreement on what a good one looks like. Some people think the mission statement should be short and easy to remember, others think it should include all the company's major goals, from how it treats its employees to how sustainable it will be.

Scott Adams nicely captured the kitchen-sink variety: "A mission statement is defined as 'a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management's inability to think clearly.' All good companies have one."

Dilbert's Automatic Mission Statement Generator, unfortunately no longer residing on the internet, randomly created gems such as these¹:

We have committed to synergistically fashion high-quality products so that we may collaboratively provide access to inexpensive leadership skills in order to solve business problems.

It is our job to continually foster world-class infrastructures as well as to quickly create principle-centered sources to meet our customer's needs.

Our challenge is to assertively network economically sound methods of empowerment so that we may continually negotiate performance-based infrastructures.

Mission statements of this type are based on advice like this²:

The mission statement should be a clear and succinct representation of the enterprise's purpose for existence. It should incorporate meaningful and measurable criteria addressing concepts such as the moral/ethical position of the enterprise, public image, the target market, products/services, the geographic domain, and expectations of growth and profitability.

And all this is supposed to happen in one clear and succinct sentence. No wonder companies end up with awkward mission statements such as this one for a fictitious airline:

Airco, Inc. will be recognized as the most progressive enterprise in the transportation business. We will offer our customers cost effective transportation service within geographical areas and markets that can benefit from our services and will ensure a return on investment and growth rates consistent with current management guidelines.

¹ http://www.bioteams.com/2008/09/27/mission_statement_generator.html

² <http://www.businessplans.org/mission.html>



This isn't a mission statement, it is the outline for a business plan. In contrast, when Boeing started its growth in the 1950s, its mission was to "Become the dominant player in commercial aircraft and bring the world into the jet age." That is short and sweet and specific.

It's not just fictitious companies either. Here is Albertson's mission statement:

Guided by relentless focus on our five imperatives, we will constantly strive to implement the critical initiatives required to achieve our vision. In doing this, we will deliver operational excellence in every corner of the Company and meet or exceed our commitments to the many constituencies we serve. All of our long-term strategies and short-term actions will be molded by a set of core values that are shared by each and every associate.

And McGraw-Hill's:

We are dedicated to creating a workplace that respects and values people from diverse backgrounds and enables all employees to do their best work. It is an inclusive environment where the unique combination of talents, experiences, and perspectives of each employee makes our business success possible. Respecting the individual means ensuring that the workplace is free of discrimination and harassment. Our commitment to equal employment and diversity is a global one as we serve customers and employ people around the world. We see it as a business imperative that is essential to thriving in a competitive global marketplace.

Got that? Do you know what either company does now?

So what does a good mission statement look like? It should reflect the spirit of an organization rather than being a string of buzzwords or fine-sounding but generic ad copy. It should also reflect what the company actually does to justify its existence. Here are the mission statements of two law enforcement agencies for the same community.

The Sheriff's Office:

As proud members of this Office, we are dedicated to protect and serve Gallatin County.

The Bozeman Police Department:

The Bozeman Police Department, in partnership with the citizens of Bozeman, is committed to improving the quality of life by identifying and resolving public safety concerns.

These are very different statements as to the focus of each organization, even though the two agencies do much the same work. The police mission statement has gone so far in the direction of community collaboration that it could apply to the city sanitation department just as easily as the police. The sheriff's mission statement is more direct: "protect and serve" makes it



immediately clear what kind of agency this statement belongs to (which is why it is a common phrase in law enforcement mission statements).

Police departments aren't alone in leaving what they do out of their mission statement. Many of them are like this one from Murdoch's Ranch and Home:

We will be the best. We will earn the admiration, respect and smiles of our customers, team, and supplier partners as the leader in our industry.

These are all worthy goals and the company appears to achieve them. However, the statement would apply equally well to just about any good business. It says a lot about attitude and little about function. It doesn't tell you what the company DOES.

Compare that to these mission statements:

AutoNation: To be America's best run, most profitable automotive retailer.

Facebook: To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.

Google: To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

Nike: To bring Inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.

There is no way to confuse any of these. They tell you what the company does and what their goal is in that regard.

A mission statement should define the ultimate benefit to customers – and, in the process, define who those customers are, from “people” to “every athlete”. While a vision statement is internal and reflects a company's goals for itself, the mission statement is external and tells customers how the business will solve their problem.³

Joe Calhoon has a good way to think about it: “A mission statement is a clear and compelling statement of why your organization exists. Mission defines why you do what you do. It's your motive, your motivation. An effective mission defines the ultimate contribution your organization will make to other people's lives.”⁴ Mission statements should be customer-centered; if your mission isn't to serve your customer, then your business isn't likely to thrive for long.

So what gets you excited about your work? And why should your customers care? Where those two intersect is your mission statement. The simplest way to start drafting a mission statement

³ Todd Daniels, MMEC

⁴ <http://joecalhoon.com/blog/2013/01/mission-statement/>



is to use Joe Calhoon's approach and finish the sentence, "Helping our customers..." Then tweak this until it sounds like you. For instance:

- Helping our customers build wealth through wise counsel.
- Helping businesses cope with change.
- Helping patients enjoy better health.
- To make people happy.
- We supply everything except the janitor.

If you find that you are getting bogged down in being the best or taking care of employees or defining your markets, then go back and write a vision statement first. This is your vision for how the company will work and it includes all this. For example, you might want to "Become the leading provider of real estate services for women in the region." That is a good, internally-focused vision for a company. A related mission statement might be "Helping women find their own place." Murdoch's mission statement, above, actually provides the basis for a vision statement, although it needs to answer the question, "Be the best what?"

A good mission statement says, in just a few words, why people should come to work each day. It gives employees a purpose for their work and tells customers what they can expect. It provides clarity and focus to the entire company, and guides decisions about how the company should work. By stating your mission in a short, easy-to-remember sentence, you improve your odds of accomplishing it.

