

Why missions and visions suck - and how to fix them

By Tiffany Markman

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This article began as, 'Why missions and visions typically suck: a letter to clients'. But then I did a bit of research and found a Bain and Company survey. It shows that organisations with clearly defined vision and mission statements tend to outperform those without. It seems these roundly disparaged little paragraphs may have their place, under a set of very strict conditions. Which I'll share with you here.



I was all set to pen a scathing indictment of mission and vision statements; items I occasionally refuse to write for my clients unless doing so culminates in a refusal to pay me.

I hate them.

And I'm not shy to say so.

No one reads them

Why my open dislike?

Because I'm a corporate writer who spends 75% of her time writing website copy, and that's where missions and visions go

to die. No one reads them. They say nothing meaningful and lull the company into a false sense of offering insight.

But then... I did some research to see what the stats were, and I found a [2013 Bain and Company survey](#), showing that organisations with clearly defined visions and missions - that are closely aligned with a strategic plan - out-perform those without.

They have their place

"Okay," I thought, "That's unexpected. But it doesn't mean much. They still suck."

Yet, the more I read, the more I had to concede that these disparaged little paragraphs may have their place, under strict conditions. Which I'll share with you.

But first: some definitions...

a.) Vision

Answer the question, 'Why are we here?' What is the ultimate reason your company exists? Vision is, in essence, where you want the company to go in the future.

b.) Mission

Your company's mission is what you do to achieve your vision, or what you feel you contribute to your industry, community or the world. It answers, 'What do we do?'

The stringent conditions

And now, the conditions for having, and using, mission and vision statements:

1. Missions and visions don't need to appear on your website.

If missions and visions are used to guide your company's future and direct your people to work together, why would the public need to read these? Why would they care? Because missions and visions are all about *you*. They rarely have anything to do with your *customer*. These statements are therefore for internal use only.

2. They must be linked to the big-picture strategy, tactics and goals.

If your mission and vision are just words, they are wasted. [The Bain survey](#) shows the extent to which *aligning mission and vision with a greater strategy* is what it takes to out-perform. Not doing so creates no organisational purpose; no continuity in thought, word or deed. What's needed is the use of mission and vision to develop and follow strategies (plans), tactics (actions) and goals (measurable milestones).

3. They must be used to help people focus on what's important.

When missions and visions are communicated successfully, all employees understand the unique purpose of the organisation; appreciate how they fit in; and recognise their contribution. They can also make better day-to-day decisions.

4. They must be used to instil accountability and ownership.

If someone steps out of line, you can draw their attention to the inconsistency of their behaviour with your mission and vision: 'You know we don't tolerate that kind of thing here.' Use your mission and vision to instil values, and you can hold people accountable for living up to them.

5. They must never contain vagueness, hyperbole, jargon, buzzwords, waffle or corporate speak.

Guided by a relentless focus on quality, agility and innovation, we strive to be the leading service provider in our industry - delivering best-of-breed solutions to both internal and external stakeholders.

What's this about? What sector does the company work in? What do they do? What's their unique selling point? Any idea? Me neither. The above is a crap mission/vision statement. And they're everywhere. Don't write crap.

- Be specific, not vague.
- Be measured, not ra-ra.
- Be simple, not jargony.
- Be authentic, not contrived.
- Be clear, not wordy.
- Be human, not robotic.

6. They must be well articulated into a simple, specific, easy-to-remember-and-repeat statement - ideally BY A PROFESSIONAL.

If you're going to use your mission and vision to enlighten, motivate, remind and stimulate your people, it needs to be memorable, concise, clear and well written. So spend some dosh and get an expert to assist you with this. Or don't bother.

A note to freelancers

If you're a freelancer, a consultant or a really small SMME, your company's values are likely to mirror your own. These tell you not only who you are as an organisation, but also who you are not. They encompass your ethics, principles, and beliefs about your business and its relationship to the world, and they can be used to formulate a mission/vision statement that guides you. (*Not* your readers.)

Create one statement

Here's a tip: Ultimately, it's a good idea to combine aspects of your mission, vision and values into one statement, but it remains important to differentiate between them during the development stage. So that you use them correctly. Good luck.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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