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How to Write a Fluff-Free Mission Statement

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Mission statements. They sound inherently business babble, don't they? But even if you think they're a little ... silly ... they're really important guideposts for making decisions, staying inspired, and setting a bigger picture that gives your day-to-day work purpose.

Problem is, because the idea of a mission statement is so vague and broad, a lot of companies have trouble nailing one down. I did some research on companies with excellent mission statements, and pulled out the characteristics they all have in common. This post will show you how to write a great mission statement, told through the lens of some of the best ones out there.

Common Mistakes People Make When Writing Mission Statements

1) It's too long. (This will, ironically, be the longest section of the post.)

In one of my first "real world" jobs, my boss -- the CEO -- asked me to write a mission statement for the company. I knew they were supposed to be pretty short, so I wrote a couple paragraphs.

Wrong. Thank you for playing, Take this toaster as a lovely parting gift.

Just kidding, he didn't fire me, but we were both equally as clueless about how to write a great mission statement. The first thing to know is that they should be really short -- as in, like, a sentence. Maybe two. Check out Southwest Airlines' mission statement, for example:

"The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit."

To give you an idea, I probably would have written that something like:

"Southwest Airlines' mission is all about customer service. Not just any kind of customer service -- but high-quality customer service -- whether at ticketing, on the plane, in the terminal, even on our website. This should come through in a few places. First, warmth. Warmth means ... "

And on, and on, and on ... and on ...

Make it short and sweet. If you can't say it in a sentence or two, you haven't really nailed the mission statement.

2) You're thinking too small.

Think beyond the tactical. Your mission isn't to create widgets. That's what you do -- but it's not why you do it. Take a cue from Microsoft, for example. Its most recent mission statement is:

"To enable people and businesses throughout the world to realize their full potential."

I consider this a huge improvement from its previous mission statement:

"A computer on every desk and in every home, running Microsoft software."

Why is it better? The old one wasn't bad, but the new one addresses something bigger than just selling a product. The new mission statement tells you who they want to reach -- people and businesses -- and what they want to help them do through Microsoft's products. It gives Microsoft a reason to exist as a business, beyond just making money.

3) It's not specific.

There's a tendency to work in generalizations when writing a mission statement, because you're trying to encompass ... well, a mission. And missions are big. (Remember, we just talked about not thinking too small.) But if you get too specific, you'll back yourself into a corner.

This isn't the right mindset. You can't be everything to everyone -- otherwise, what's your differentiator? What are you adding to the universe?

Zappos does a great job of communicating a larger mission, without compromising specificity. Their mission statement reads:

"To provide the best customer service possible."

They're not trying to loop in price, quality, changing the world, having the best corporate culture ... they want to provide the best customer service possible. That might include all of the aforementioned when it comes down to tactics, but it doesn't need to be in the mission statement. This is the perfect balance between thinking big, but still being specific.

4) The language is full of jargon.

This is where the business babble starts to creep in. (And often, the business babble creeps in because you're not being specific enough.) We all know what business babble is, so let's just look at a jargon-free mission statement to set the precedent for what we should all be striving for. Google's is an excellent example:

"Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

They could have said that like this:

"Google's mission is to utilize the digital information inputs of various sources and outlets and dispense it in a structure optimized for user-understanding."

But they didn't. Because that's ridiculous. (And it's pretty much the opposite of making information "accessible and useful.")

5) It's not something people want to "get behind."

Your mission should resonate with people, particularly you and your employees. It should address a real problem -- or something people care about, at least. Think about why you wanted to get into your business in the first place ... you were probably inspired by something, right? Whatever motivated you then (unless it was for the money, in which case ignore this advice) might be what you want to tap into when crafting your mission statement.

Inspiring mission statements aren't just for nonprofit organizations, either. I happen to think Google's mission statement is one of the most inspiring I've ever heard. Or take a look at Coca-Cola -- how can a beverage company have an inspiring mission statement? Its mission statement is:

"To refresh the world; to inspire moments of optimism and happiness; to create value and make a difference."

That last part is a little vague and verging on business babble (what does "create value" really mean?), but I love that middle part. Your mission statement *should* be a bit lofty. That's okay. Aspiration is good -- it inspires people to be creative and work hard.

Questions to Ask That'll Help You Write Your Mission Statement

If you're totally stuck on your mission statement, ask yourself the following questions to get the flow of ideas going. Think of it like getting past writer's block ... but, you know, for a mission statement.

1) What do we do?

2) Why did I go into business in the first place?

Or, if you're not a founder of the business ...

3) Why did I want to work at this company/in this industry?

4) What do I want this company's legacy to be?

5) What *doesn't* matter to this company's legacy?

6) How do I want to help people?

7) What value does our company bring that's unique from other companies?

Remember, your mission statement isn't set in stone. It's actually wise to revisit your mission statement once in a while to see if it still aligns with your company's goals. Some companies, for instance, choose to write mission statements that help them solve a short-term problem their company is facing -- these can be updated later to reflect a larger mission once your short-term issues are addressed.

However you approach your mission statement, just check back every couple years to see if it still aligns with the space you play in, and the world you live in. If your company is around for a long time, it will inevitably change -- your mission statement might have to change along with it.

Image credit: [David~O](#)