

**STYBEL  
PEABODY &  
ASSOCIATES, INC.**

**Selling Professional Services to  
Time-Starved Senior Executives  
Who Desperately Want to Ignore You.**

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What do you do for a living, and who hires you? Take a minute to write down your answers to these two questions.

At the conclusion of this article, write down your responses to the same questions again.

If we have caused you to rethink and reshape your responses the first time around, perhaps we have put you on the road to generating more income in your professional service practice.

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We will begin this article by focusing on why senior executives are desperate to not want to pay attention to you and how you can use Spiro Agnew's wisdom to avoid achieving their objective.

## **Learning from Spiro Agnew**

Spiro Agnew served nearly two terms as Richard Nixon's acerbic vice-president. He was eventually forced to resign due to his involvement in a bribery scandal while he was Governor of Maryland. During the 1968 Presidential Elections, Agnew kept making prescriptive statements about the problems with poor people living in the inner cities of the United States. One reporter noted that Agnew hardly ever visited these inner city locations yet he considered himself an expert with its problems. Agnew's terse reply was, "If you've seen one inner city, you've seen them all." We honor if the former Vice President by calling it the Spiro Agnew Framework.

At one level, this response reflected Spiro Agnew's crude perspective about the world. At a more important level, Agnew gives an important insight into how senior executives must protect themselves in a world of information overload. They feel that there is too much information and too little time. If they pay equal attention to all stimuli, they will surely be ineffective. Cognitive guidelines that allow them to decide not to pay attention to new information are an important mechanism for professional survival. Heidi and Alvin Toffler wrote about these cognitive issues in *FUTURE SHOCK*.

Spiro Agnew Framework is an example of a common cognitive device: sample one item in a category, and then declare you have enough information to draw conclusions about the entire category. The Spiro Agnew Framework is both crude and necessary.

Here is an example of the Spiro Agnew Framework:

What is YOUR reaction when you are at a party and you meet a pleasant stranger who tells you he sells insurance?

The issue can be summarized with the following dilemma: if senior executives fail to employ the Spiro Agnew Framework, they will be ineffective. And if you don't break them of their use of the Spiro Agnew Framework with you, you will be ineffective in developing new business.

### **Create a New Category and Dominate It**

One way to destroy the Spiro Agnew Framework is to create a new category and dominate this new category. This is a new way of thinking of positioning.

If we ask an audience to say the first thing they think of when we utter the word car, we are likely to get no group consensus. But if we ask that same audience to say the first

thing they think of for the category “safe car,” we quickly form a group consensus around "Volvo." Volvo dominates the "safe car" category. The reality is that there are cars sold today that are as safe as Volvos but no car but Volvo dominates the “safe car” category.

Mention the word software, and there is little consensus. Mention the word groupware, and most people in high tech would respond with "Lotus." Mention strategic planning to consultants, and a number of consulting firms come to mind. Mention the category "strategic planning with CEOs of Fortune 100 firms," and the framework will narrow considerably.

There was a time when there were just three categories of mutual funds: equity funds, bond funds, and money market funds. Morningstar next came up with the idea of classifying equity funds into nine categories. Recently, Mutual Fund Magazine defined 64 categories of equity mutual funds. Can you create a new category for yourself, one that you will dominate? The firm that owns the category defines that category. Fidelity has been brilliant in creating new mutual fund categories where Fidelity is #1 in that particular category.

For example, Stybel Peabody provides senior executive retained search, senior level coaching, and senior level outplacement services. All three categories are crowded. We define ourselves with a new category that subordinates all our service offerings: we are one of the world’s leading firms in helping companies achieve leadership change when the stakes are high. This helps us to destroy the Spiro Agnew Framework with our audience.

### **Dilemmas**

A second way to destroy the Spiro Agnew Framework is focus on your services as an answer to management dilemmas.

A dilemma is defined as a choice among options that seem equally unfavorable. "I should hate you, but I love you" is an example of an archetype personal dilemma. We do not say, “We provide outplacement services.” We say, “We help leaders fire their friends.”

Dilemmas are wonderful Spiro Agnew Framework destroyers.

Most leaders define themselves as outstanding problem solvers. If a service is defined in terms of a solution to a problem, leaders wonder why this problem can’t be solved in-house or by cheaper resources. By definition, problems have expensive “optimal” solutions or cheaper yet satisfactory outcomes.

Define your service as a solution to an insolvable dilemma and you get a different reaction.

Problems can be “solved.” Dilemmas can really not be solved. They must be “managed.” Few leaders are trained to think in terms of dilemmas or how to manage these dilemmas. Discussing your service in terms of dilemma management helps destroy the Spiro Agnew Framework. They HAVE to start paying attention and not dismissing you.

Here are some additional examples from our client work:

#### BUSINESS LAW

"We do business law" would be the functional way to describe a firm's specialization in legal matters. On the other hand, saying, "We help corporate clients make mergers and acquisitions happen," describes a value proposition clearly and concisely. There is a third way of expressing the same idea: “We are retained by corporate clients who find that if they move too quickly, the company may not be acting in shareholders' best interests. But if it doesn't move quickly enough, the company may fail in its fiduciary responsibility.”

This expression of a dilemma captures several messages at once. It conveys "we make mergers happen" while adding the following themes: We know how to manage the pace of M&A negotiations; philosophically, our focus is on our client company's fiduciary responsibility to shareholders. It also clearly defines the decision maker: company officers most at risk in exercising their judgment on behalf of shareholders. It takes one second to say, "I do business law." It takes two seconds to say, "We make M&As happen." It takes an additional 18 seconds to articulate the dilemma. Notice how much more information was packed into that addendum.

#### COMMUNICATIONS

"We do communications consulting" clearly expresses the functional perspective. "We help align the company's message with its strategy" clearly states the value proposition and also helps define the client.

Alternatively, we could say: We work with companies that find communication a risky proposition. And it is an even riskier proposition if they fail to communicate early, often, and with zest.

#### FINANCIAL PLANNING

"I am a financial planner" clearly expresses the functional perspective. "I am retained by companies to assist senior executives in putting together financial plans to help them achieve their meaningful life goals" expresses the value proposition.

A dilemma framework might be: “I work with senior executives who say, "I don't trust "experts." On the other hand, if I don't find some expert I can trust, I fear I will never be able to achieve the financial goals I have. Notice how the dilemma construction moves

the framework from the focus of the financial planner as a competent professional to one in which the financial planner is someone who earns the trust of mistrustful people.

## HUMAN RESOURCE CONSULTING

"I do human resource consulting" describes HR consulting in a functional way. "I help align compensation, recruiting, and training to the corporate strategy" might be a value statement.

A dilemma framework might be "I work with clients who find themselves with the following dilemma-if we take a rigid approach to how we treat people, we lose our best people. And if we don't create appropriate human resource structures, we fail our obligations to manage corporate risk."

## DILEMMAS ARE POWERFUL.

Dilemmas are powerful because they simultaneously touch the cognitive and emotional issues facing prospective clients.

Revisit the Questions In the beginning of this article we asked you to write down your responses to What do you do for a living, and who hires you?

How would you respond to these questions now?

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Those of us in the professional services must manage our own dilemmas while helping our clients manage theirs. The dilemma for professional service providers is:

Clients hire us for our depth of knowledge. If we stick with what we know, we become obsolete. And if we constantly reinvent ourselves, we become superficial.

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