

Matthew: Hello and welcome to Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant, Managing Editor here at MarketingProfs and I thank you for listening.

Miracle worker, Superman of the mind, guru in residence, a horse whisperer for writers and business thinkers; this is what Mark Levy's clients call him. To me he's just a regular guy from Queens who lives in Jersey and has a way with words. I also think that he's a not-so-accidental genius.

Mark taught a class on finding your voice for our MarketingProfs University writing course last year, a role he'll be reprising this may. Since helping people find their voice and the unique story that sets them apart from their competition is what Mark does for a living, I invited him to join us on Marketing Smarts and give us a glimpse into his methods. As you will hear, this method consists mainly of asking a whole bunch of questions and particularly questions that don't, at first glance, have a heck of a lot to do with your business, your value proposition, or your unique selling point.

Before we get started I'd like to remind everyone that if you like what you hear on Marketing Smarts, and even if you don't, you can always leave us a review on iTunes or a comment on our site. Alternately, you can reach out to me directly via email. My email address is mattg@marketingprofs.com.

Let's get started. Mark, welcome to Marketing Smarts.

Mark: Thanks so much, Matt. I appreciate you having me on.

Matthew: I'm so glad you could join us. Let's start out with you telling our listeners a little bit about what Mark Levy does.

Mark: Sure. I'm Mark Levy and I run a marketing strategy firm called Levy Innovation. Consultants and entrepreneurial companies hire me to increase their fees by up to 2,000%. I do that predominantly in two ways.

The first way is I'm a positioning consultant, so I help the business come up with their big sexy idea, their signature idea, the thing that they want to be known for in the marketplace, and we make sure that idea comes through loud and clear in everything they do, like in their websites and any whitepapers they write, blog posts, and speeches they give and elevator speeches. Again, they become known for that idea, they are the flag bearers of that idea and anyone who is attracted to that idea in the marketplace has to seek my client out. So that's the first thing I do around the signature idea.

Second thing I do is I coach these clients to write books to use as skyrockets for their business. My clients include *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week* bestselling authors.

Matthew: First of all, I love what was so colorful about that, which is essential an elevator pitch. You do write on your blog about what makes a good elevator pitch and you had strong detail there, help people increase their revenues and speaker fees. You also used the colorful language of the skyrocket. I really wasn't expecting that.

I was wondering if you could walk us through what you do when you're helping people identify and clarify and articulate their signature idea.

Mark: Here's the thing. When people hire me, when they come to see me, if they knew what their big idea should be and how best to express it they would have had that idea already and they wouldn't be in front of me and they wouldn't have paid me. So the mere fact that I'm working with someone, we assume that what it is that they're currently using may be partially there, but it's not all the way there yet.

What I need to do then is in essence kind of get them to forget their normal responses and their normal ways that they really are. So they come to my office here in western New Jersey and we work for two comprehensive days on their business.

Basically I try to get them to take a lot of side routes. So they come and we're going to talk about who their clients are and we're going to talk about the client psychographics and we're going to talk about the demographics and we're going to talk about all that stuff and business goals. But, invariably the first thing I ask them about is their parents.

I say, "Where were you born? What did your parents do? What was it like growing up? What did your father do? What did your mom do? Where did you go to school? What did you like about going to school? What did you do that was mischievous? Where did you go to high school? What did you do there? Where did you go to college? What did you major in? What do you wish you had majored in? How did you start in business? Tell me stories about this. Tell me stories about that."

Invariably people will often ask as they're speaking to me, they're having a ball but they always start saying, "You know, I hope what I'm telling you is helpful." Like they always preface what they're about to say because they're seemingly going to someplace that they don't normally go. As I said, that's exactly what it is that they need.

People tend to segment or sequester certain kinds of thinking in certain parts of the brain, so people are using their business thinking over and over again, and it's not getting them the answers that they need. So we need to open up the other compartments in their mind and hear

about stories and things that suggest why they started in certain places in business or why they didn't go places.

I'm always asking information that seems kind of counterintuitive. For instance, I used to be a Director of the third largest book wholesaler in the world before I did this. I helped them sell over a billion dollars worth of product. A very common thing for me to ask a bookstore, if I was speaking to an independent or a Barnes & Noble or Borders, a common question for me to ask would be I would want to know the layout of their store – I'm speaking to them on the phone.

I would ask them questions like, "What book gets stolen the most from your store?" That would be very important to me because I used to be the assistant manager of the B. Dalton's in Greenwich Village and the books that were most stolen in our store, which were like the Charles Bukowski books and the Burrows books and the Kerouac books and whatnot, those were also our biggest sellers.

So there is often this hidden economy in certain places. So in the same way in that store there was a hidden economy, people in their businesses – I'm not saying it has anything to do with theft – there are certain things that are happening in their business that if we looked at them the big idea might emerge. So I'm always trying to get people off track.

Matthew: Now you've got me thinking about Bukowski and Burrows and all these guy's books. I've never stolen them, I will say, but I might check them out of the library, which is a kind of stealing I guess.

With that question, so I can understand as your book wholesaler and you're talking and you ask them what's the most stolen book, you're now getting kind of a data point about what's popular and what's their clientele look like and things like that. It sounds like though when you're talking to your clients and you're asking them these specific questions, is it about the specific answers they're coming up with to the questions you're asking or are you using this process of questioning to actually get them into a different mindset?

Mark: Right, I see. So in essence you're saying is it the series of questions I'm asking that in a way is kind of hypnotizing them into some other way of thinking or am I actually taking the ideas that they're saying and creating with those – is that what it is you mean?

Matthew: Yes. Just like when the person says to you, "I hope this helping," what they're thinking is, "I hope I'm giving you useful information because now I'm trusting you to help figure out something out." A lot of times in psychological testing you might call people in and say, "I want you to take the psychological test," but what you're really testing them about is if a woman walks into a room full of men where will she sit, or if a man walks into a room full of

women what's going to be the protocol for sitting down. The test itself has nothing to do with it, they don't even care what you fill out.

So in a sense that's what I guess I'm asking. Do you then lead people back like, "Remember when you were talking about how much you were fascinated with comic books when you were in Junior High School and what a big part of your world that was? Let's delve deeper into that." Or just by getting them animated and thinking and kind of looking at their life from a new perspective, which when you have to tell your life to someone else it automatically starts putting things in perspective for you.

Is that what you're going for or do you actually use the stuff that they're coming up with as fodder for identifying the signature idea?

Mark: Oh. I generally take the stuff take the stuff that they're coming up with. A lot of times they'll tell me a story and it will pass right by us. I may comment on it or I may write it down or something like that, but it passes right by until they say other things and then I see patterns.

So it's not so much my questioning, it's the actual material. They'll say things to me and then I'll say, "Tell me more about that part of the story," or, "Why did you do this? How does this story relate to what it is that you do today?" Make sense?

So I'm very big on the fact that back stories – a back story I define as a story that shows that you were born to do what it is you do.

Matthew: So you're creating a sense of destiny out of the way the story unfolds.

Mark: Right. That's a good way to put it. Sometimes your back story is one thing that you did or sometimes it's a series of things. Let me give you an example of what a back story is, if I may, and then how you would position someone behind it.

Matthew: All right.

Mark: So eight years ago a man called me named Bill Treasurer. Bill said, "Mark, I'm a management consultant. I do leadership development and team building workshops. Unfortunately, 300,000 other consultants do exactly what it is I do. So when I go into an organization trying to win the organization's business I always go in hat in hand, kind of hanging my head because I have no real way of standing out from those other 300,000 consultants."

"Even when I win the organization's business – and I occasionally win their business – they always get me way down on price because I have no way of holding onto any value that I

established in their eyes. A top week for me, a week I absolutely pray for, is \$1,800. I can't keep going on this way. I need your help."

So Bill hired me. I interviewed Bill, I interviewed his clients, I interviewed his colleagues, and I discovered something very interesting. Bill Treasurer before he was a management consultant was a professional high diver in theme parks. He would climb up a nine story high radio tower, that is a ladder nine stories high, when he got to the top he's spray himself with gasoline, he would light himself on fire, and he would dive nine stories into water.

Over the course of 10 years he did that 1,500 times. He was so good at being Captain Inferno that the theme park worked for named him the captain of an entire team of Captain Infernos that went up and down the east coast performing this gig.

But the most interesting thing about Bill Treasurer, he was and still is afraid of heights. So I took the idea that Bill did what he had to do despite his fear and I married it to the fact that he does leadership development and team building workshops, and we made his company Giant Leap Consulting, they build courage in organizations, they help leaders and their employees take the risks they know they should be taking but aren't.

So all of Bill's keynotes, all of his workshops, all of his consulting started to revolve around ways of driving fear out of the workplace so that people could take the most significant risks they had to take to achieve their top goals. So what happened for Bill because of these repositioning or because we took his back story and we led with it and make sure his whole brand was seen through that back story?

I told you a week Bill used to pray for was \$1,800. He can now make \$10,000, \$20,000, \$30,000, even \$40,000 in a week. A couple of Octobers ago he had his first ever \$100,000 month. He's booked for months in advance and his last book came out from Barrett Collier, the title is called *Courage Goes to Work*.

So all of that was surfaced from finding not the obvious business focus, the thing that everyone would say your business would be about. As a matter of fact, when we were first thinking about doing this there were people who were saying, "Bill, you deal with CEOs, you deal with C-level people. They don't want to be hiring someone who sets themselves on fire and dives nine stories. They want very stayed stoic people. That's the wrong thing to lead with." There was vehement people saying, "Don't do that."

But we did it anyway and we led with it. And now he is becoming a superstar, he is in tremendous demand. So that's the idea of taking the non-obvious information and leading with the non-obvious information.

Matthew: My first question is, have you ever lit yourself on fire?

Mark: I have tried to swallow fire, because I have a background as a magician.

Matthew: Right.

Mark: You know that. So I swallowed fire. The funny thing about swallowing fire is it's very hot. I would not recommend that anyone even attempt it. I actually thought there would be some kind of trick as the fire came close to my mouth.

Matthew: That it would get cooler?

Mark: And it did not. It was very scary and very painful. Under no circumstances should anyone try it. So no, I have never lit myself on fire.

Matthew: Okay. Well that's one thing we both have in common, because I've never lit myself on fire either. Even though when I was a kid I was obsessed with KISS and particular the figure of Gene Simmons, and a lot of my friends did try fire spitting and stuff like that, I never brought myself to doing that.

Mark: You're very smart.

Matthew: Wow. Well, that was a story I really wasn't expecting to hear.

Mark: Not all my stories are about people lighting themselves on fire, I do have more conventional ones. But again, we were just talking about the idea, not to beat this point to death.

Matthew: Sure.

Mark: The same answers, it's the problem with a lot of business writing. You and I were talking about that earlier, that a lot of business writing can be very tedious. That's because if you keep on approaching problems and ideas and even if the solutions are right you need to come up with a surprising perspective, you need to come up with an interesting fact.

You need to tell a story that no one has ever heard before, otherwise you're just repeating what's already been said before and you're not making any contribution to the field. And by not making any contribution to the field you're not getting anyone interested in what you have to do unless they're just going to hire you as a hired hand just to do something that they could have done but they don't have time to do it.

They're certainly not going to hire you for any thought leadership position. Thought leadership means that you are actually leading, that you have something that inspires people to go into a

different direction. The concept of thought leadership is the fact that other people are involved and they're following what you're coming up with, that's the key point of thought leadership. So you need to come up with something surprising and something valuable and interesting in order to be a thought leader and to be interesting.

Matthew: Right. It's interesting – I'm sorry to echo what you just said with interesting.

Mark: Sure, add a contribution to what I just said.

Matthew: I'm trying to keep up. It's funny because this morning I was at a social media breakfast here locally and there were a lot of people there that had actually done some interesting work with their clients and things like that. The thing is everyone seemed to agree with each other.

One of the things that people always say, in fact in the last two days I've probably heard it 20 times, about content has to be engaging, it has to be interesting, it has to be provocative, you want to create stuff that people really care about because that's how content marketing works. All I kept thinking is that's so easy to say those words and it's so difficult to actually generate anything that's truly engaging, or people use the word innovative or really unique perspective and all these other things.

So obviously people struggle with that in their business and a lot of times, like you were saying with Bill Treasurer, it's very easy to just get into the mindset of, "A million people do exactly what I do. Why would they go with someone else instead of me? We're all the same, I'm just lucky they're even talking to me. Whatever they give me I'm happy to get."

Not everyone can spend two days with Mark Levy, and especially maybe the company doesn't want to invest in that because really they're just trying to get some blogging happening on a regular basis and we want people to start interacting with us. So are there sort of self exercises that people can do? Do you need to seek someone out to help ask you questions and push you in different directions? What are things that people can do?

Since I agree with you, which I think your basic premise is everyone has some weird interesting story that's the angle that's going to make them different and stand out, and if they can tap into that it's going to infuse what they're writing with new life and verve and it's actually going to be attention getting, and maybe even make them into leaders eventually. What is it that people can do to plug into that, to tap into that on their own?

Mark: Good question. So one of the very first things that I do when I'm positioning someone I often give them an exercise, which is in my book *Accidental Genius*, and it's called open up words, or open up a word. That is people will tell me what it is they do and they will

often use commoditized language. That's cool, there's nothing wrong with that, they're explaining what it is they do and they use the same kind of language everyone does. I'll take a key point from what it is they said.

Let's say they talk about engagement, they say, "I do employee engagement." Let's say they're a consultant who does employee engagement. Then I'll say to them, "Let's open up that word or that phrase, employee engagement. What does that mean? What does it mean to you when you say it without using that same phrase again and saying it means being engaged? What does engagement mean to you? Where did you first hear the word engagement? What do you think other people hear when they hear the word engagement? What do you think is going through their mind? What scenes come to your mind when you think about employee engagement from your past or from stories other people have told you, or from a movie or from a book? What scenes, what snapshots, what prejudices do you have? What are all the things?"

Because people often unintentionally take a concept and the concept almost acts as a speed bump or a wall and it often shuts off thinking. So they use all this multi-syllabic Latinate language and they really don't look at where that stuff originated and what brings that kind of thing to mind.

So often when we go to enough interesting places like this – and by the way, that kind of technique of opening up words, of coming up with scenes and stories and whatnot, a wonderful I read years ago by Peter Elbow called *Writing with Power* is where I had first read about that. So it's this idea of don't just tell me what it is you do in the ordinary language that you normally tell me, tell me what's the lineage of that idea. You don't have to go research it in a heavy duty way, just off the top of your head tell me stories, scenes, prejudices, first thoughts, all kinds of stuff. Write them down and we can just discuss it.

Often new material insights will come from that. Does that make sense?

Matthew: That makes perfect sense. I think it's easy, especially I was thinking about it in terms of the elevator pitch and things like that. As someone at one point was in training and tried to help people come up with their elevator pitches. It's very easy, you can tell especially the kind of rookies the way they talked about things was in this commoditized way.

What we found was that people would talk about the company, like they would be calling a client who would say, "What do you do?" and the person would say, "Well, we do blah blah blah and we help people do blah blah blah with blah blah blah." But, we found that the people who were the better sales people and the more experienced sales people tended to talk about what they had done. What do you do? "I work with so and so and we were able to do this. I worked with this other company and we were able to do this."

So in a way it's funny, because I think when people say "I work on engaging clients," they're really just parroting something they heard and they probably haven't ever thought about it in a way like what do those words really mean. What does the word engagement mean? When you got engaged that was a big deal, why? When you find something engaging what's happening there? They've never really thought about it.

Usually once they've had some experiences they just forget about that language all together and they just start talking at their best, I think, about their actual experiences because that's something that people can relate to or sort of hang their hat on.

Mark: That's right. Absolutely. The kind of detail that you're talking about and the kind of freshness of image means everything. For instance, my elevator speech which you heard is, "Consultants and entrepreneurial companies hire me to increase their fees by up to 2,000%." No one was coming to me asking me to increase their fees by up to 2,000%.

Matthew: Right.

Mark: That purely came out of me examining my own material for stories and ideas of what was happening. I actually made a list of all my clients and I made a list of the kind of results they were enjoying due in part to the work that I was doing.

One guy I just said, "So you used to charge \$1,000 an hour," and now he gets \$20,000 an hour. This guy used to charge \$100 an hour and now he makes \$25,000 a day. This guy used to do \$3,000 speeches and now he does \$20,000 speeches. This guy did \$1,800 a week, now he can make \$40,000 a week.

So I started going through all that stuff and I found a commonality, but it's the detail of up to 2,000% that really rings true for people. I talk about this in a story, which I know you know and I'll tell it very briefly now, the idea behind the true detail of what it is you're doing.

So it's a story of George Orwell. Everyone out there knows Orwell. Orwell was the British novelist, his real name was Eric Blair, and he wrote Animal Farm and he wrote 1984. When he was a young man before he had written any of those novels in the 1930s he hated fascism and he wanted to fight fascism, he decided to then join to go over to Spain and fight in the Spanish civil war. This was 1936 or so.

So he went in there, he joined up and he got a helmet and a rifle, he was a real actual soldier and he went fighting. He writes about this one day years later that he was ducked down there early one morning, he saw 50 yards away or so a parapet, like across the horizon, he saw an enemy soldier stand up early in the morning and the guy was half dressed. He was wearing his

pants, he wasn't wearing a shirt, and the guy stood up and he was holding up his pants with both hands and he started to run at breakneck speed across the parapet.

Orwell raised his rifle and got the enemy soldier in his sights and was about to squeeze off a shot and then he put his rifle down. He never fired a shot. He wrote about it years later in an essay and he said, "The reason I didn't fire my rifle was that detail about the pants." He said, "I had come to Spain to kill fascists, but a man running while holding up his pants with both hands is no longer a fascist. He was a fellow human being like yourself and you do not want to kill him."

I read about this story in a book on writing and the two authors of that book called that detail about the pants a detail "lifelike in the extreme." So when I'm working with clients I'm always trying to get them to open up concepts, to redefine words, to see stories, and I'm always getting them to look at what really happened, what were the real details.

A very common thing for me to say to my client, and I don't mean this disrespectfully, they'll say something to me and I'll say, "I don't believe you. I don't believe that that's really what happened. I know that it sounds like it's what happened from a business context, but tell me what really happened."

"You said people worked better because of what you did. Well, I can't picture that. Tell me what that looks like. Don't tell me what that looks like in generalities. Who worked better? What were they doing? What did you see? What actually was happening?"

And from that stuff I ask that enough and people start giving you the real honest thing of what happened. You start putting those honest ideas together and you start getting amazing positions and amazing competitive advantages and things that really influence and persuade people because they ring with honesty. They're not head spun abstract facts that you just are parroting that you created in your head, they're actual things that people can really see with their eyes and they know that they happened.

Matthew: In a sense what you're saying is no matter what you're writing and what you're trying to put out there in the world to get people's attention and to draw them in and intrigue them, in a sense it's really like doing all the work – and it sounds like a lot of work – but the work you do is the work that's going to help you consistently uncover and bring to the light the unexpected sort of startling but intriguing detail that's actually going to grab and hold the attention of other people. Is that a fair way of summarizing at least part of the way you think about approaching these problems?

Mark: Yes. The people listening to this might want to go to my website, which LevyInnovation.com, not selling anything but I'm giving gifts away.

Matthew: You're generous.

Mark: Yes, yes. This is based on what you just said, there are two ebooks there that people might want to download – they're for free, you don't need to leave your email or anything. One is called *The Fascination Factor* and one is called *List Making as a Tool of Thought Leadership*. They're allied concepts.

Really the idea behind both of them is if you want to position your business forcefully or you want to write a really cool elevator speech, or you want to write a book that's a real contribution to the world, or whatever it is you want to do, you need to start not with what the marketplace wants from you.

If you start from there the marketplace only knows what the marketplace has already seen, so the marketplace is going to only ask you for "me too" concepts, concepts that they've already digested and that are acceptable to them. The marketplace also doesn't understand what your goals are as a business person and as a human being and an artist. So the marketplace only knows what it wants and it might lead you astray from what it is you really should be doing.

You need to get very clear about what's going to help you on all levels as a business person and as a human being and as a contributor to the world and a way to do that is to look at your fascinations and the things that you obsess about in life, like the best stories you know, the best ideas you know, the worst advice you've ever heard, the best advice you've ever heard, just all kinds of different file draws in your mind of information.

In both of these ebooks I talk about what those things might be. You need to share with yourself first what those things are. You won't know them totally right off the top of your head, you have to do a little bit of writing to figure them out. But writing itself generates ideas. So you generate these ideas and you come from a place – the stuff that fascinates you and that you found helpful and the stuff that helps you live your life, we are more alike than we are different. There is a population out there who will find the same things fascinating and the same things helpful for them.

So you get that stuff out there in detail and then you use it in everything you do and the right audience who will truly appreciate you at your best and who you can truly help them in a really meaningful way will seek you out and you will have a ball serving them. That's really the way I try to operate what I do in whatever it is I do.

Matthew: All right, Mark, thank you so much for joining us on Marketing Smarts today. Thank you, listener, for listening here to the end. This has been Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs, I've been your host Matthew Grant and I'll talk to you next week.

