

# Create a Defining Phrase

BY CHUCK GREEN

The most important part of any design is the message it sends. In addition to your logo and the name of your organization, you should create a five- to fifteen-word phrase that defines what you do and the benefit of your product or service to your customer.

For a small business, a defining phrase is better than a slogan or a tag line. Slogans and tag lines are so-called attention-getters that very often do not plainly declare what a company does.

A slogan such as “Just do it,” for example, is successful for a company such as Nike because it spends millions of dollars repeating the message in its advertising. A small business such as a photo lab or a day care center doesn’t get that kind of exposure and is better off getting right to the point.

## 1. Specify your market

There are two components to a successful defining phrase. The first component provides the big picture: it clearly communicates the business you’re in. The name “Delta Corporation,” for example, doesn’t tell you what the company does, but the names “Delta Faucet Company” and “Delta Air Lines” are abundantly clear. If your organization’s name specifies its market, you won’t need to repeat it in the phrase, but if it does not, lead into your phrase by clearly specifying your market.

## 2. Translate features (me) to benefits (you)

The second component of your phrase should express the most important benefits of using your product or service. To do this, translate features to benefits—an extremely important distinction. Features describe your products or services from your organization’s viewpoint; benefits describe them from your customer’s perspective.

A *me*-oriented defining phrase is more effective when stated in terms of the customer. Visa could have used one like, “Our credit cards are accepted around the world,” but instead they chose the more powerful, “Visa—It’s everywhere you want to be.” Apple could have claimed “the highest-quality computers” but opted instead to offer “The power to be your best.” “A large selection” is a feature, “see all models in one place” is a benefit.

## 3. List benefits in order of importance

Next, list the benefits in order of importance. Our first inclination is to advertise as many benefits as possible in the hope that everyone will find something that compels them to take action. But too many messages muddy the water, especially in the confines of a fifteen-word phrase. Keep it as simple and as focused as possible.

For example, the top benefits of a hypothetical copier retailer might be:

1. We offer a lowest-price guarantee
2. We have the area’s largest selection
3. We support and service everything we sell twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week

## 4. Identify the hook

The ideal defining phrase includes a *hook*—the combination of benefits that establishes the important difference between you and your competition. In advertising, it is sometimes called the unique selling proposition. To identify the hook, combine two or more of the top benefits. If that doesn’t demonstrate the distinct difference, or if your benefits are much the same as your competitor’s, study their marketing materials and focus on a benefit they do not promote.

## 5. Condense it into five to fifteen words

Next, condense your ideas into a five- to fifteen-word phrase. In this case it might be: “Lexington’s largest copier showroom and guaranteed lowest prices, backed by 24/7 support and service.” Too boring? Clever is good if it doesn’t get in the way. It

is far better to have a less-exciting defining phrase than a line that twenty percent of your prospects don’t understand.

## 6. Test your defining phrase with customers

Finally, test your defining phrase with customers. The true test of whether you have a good phrase is to ask someone who doesn’t know anything about your business if, by reading it, they can name the type of business you are in and the benefits you have defined. One difficulty of writing and producing your own marketing materials is that you are very close to the action—at times, too close to see the message clearly. Run your defining phrase by a few customers to hear their reactions and suggestions.

### ABOUT CHUCK GREEN’S DESIGN IDEAS

Effective design targets a precise group of prospects, highlights consumer-centered benefits, presents solutions to specific problems, and uses unique words and imagery to move people to action. Anything less is decoration.

Chuck is a veteran designer, author of *Design-It-Yourself Graphic Workshop* (Rockport Publishers), and the host of ideabook.com: the how-to hub for everyone interested in the real-world, practical application of design in marketing ideas, organizations, and products or service (<http://www.ideabook.com>).

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NAME/MARKET

## Sampler Copiers

DEFINING PHRASE

BENEFIT A

BENEFIT B

Lexington’s<sup>1</sup> largest copier<sup>2</sup> showroom<sup>3</sup> and guaranteed<sup>4</sup> lowest prices,<sup>5</sup> backed by<sup>6</sup> 24/7<sup>7</sup> support<sup>8</sup> and service.<sup>9</sup>

BENEFIT C