

Opinions & Papers

PERCEPTION IS REALITY

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Clients sometimes get frustrated when we present the findings of research we've conducted, whether we investigated the thoughts and opinions of their consumers, business partners, investors, or industry experts. "How can they have said that?" they'll ask; "It's not *true!*" For better or for worse, it doesn't always matter if your constituents have a full grasp of the truth; what matters is what they *think* is true. Their perception is your reality, and their perceptions should be the starting point for your marketing efforts.

For example, in working with health care companies, we've found that medical professionals who refer patients for a range of services don't understand how those services work. They're not fully aware of the differences among the options they recommend, or clear about the kind of supervision patients receive, nor do they always know who's responsible for communicating about a patient's status. And as shocking as the gap in their knowledge is, educating these constituents isn't a good use of resources.

The greatest clarity in the world about how a category, business, or brand works won't answer any consumer or constituent's most important question, which is invariably: "what does this mean to *me?*" The benefits *they* derive from your service or product or brand—whether those benefits are rational or emotional—will always be what forms the most important impression your brand makes.

We're not saying you can just make something up as the basis for your marketing and brand-building efforts. Good brands are like good people: they don't lie. And they're honest with themselves. First and foremost, that requires understanding how the people who ultimately create a successful brand—its consumers—see and understand the value it holds.