

Clarity Wins

by Steve Woodruff

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[SAMPLE: Foreword and Chapter 1](#)

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Foreword by Josh Bernoff

Life is a muddle.

Life is filled with misunderstandings, loved ones who change their minds, children, pets, flat tires, presidential elections, and any number of other sources of chaos and confusion. The chaos is inescapable.

Business is no different. If anything, it's worse. In most companies, people who work together to generate a profit operate in a barely controlled manner. Those same companies pay consultants millions of dollars to create "identities" for themselves and then, for the most part, operate in a way that undermines those carefully curated identities. Market strategies and messages are muddled. No one really questions this; it seems to just be part of the air we breathe in the business world. It's background noise.

At least no one questioned it until Steve Woodruff came along.

Steve is a really nice guy who is also really smart. (It's amazing how infrequently those two qualities go together.) More to the point: Steve is clear. He is clear about who he is, what he does, and how it helps people. Steve is the King of Clarity.

Steve shares a simple but powerful insight: clarity creates referrals.

If you pick a specific target market, identify how you can help people in that market, and follow through, you will have happy clients. But happy clients, in themselves, are not enough.

You want happy clients *who can refer you*. Clients will say, “Ah, yes; when it comes to copy editing business books, Merlina is the best there is.” Or “You need to integrate your Web site with Salesforce? You really should talk to the people at Cloud Widget.”

Or “You need help with clarity and referrals? Talk to Steve Woodruff.”

Referrals are more important than search engine optimization. They’re more important than digital advertising, your LinkedIn description (which is probably lame), your tweets, what shoes you wear, or how firm your handshake is. Referrals are the direct path from doing a good job to getting more business. And the reason you’re not getting more of them is that people don’t know how to describe what you do – because *you* don’t know how to describe what you do. This book helps with that.

This is an easy book to consume. It's simple and short and logical. It would be easy to read it, smile, and then go on with your chaotic day and do everything the same way you have been.

Please don't do that.

Here's what you should do.

First, read these pages and take notes about what this means to you, your career, and your business. Go ahead, highlight and dog-ear the pages (or whatever passes for those actions in the eBook version).

Pigeonhole yourself (yes, you read that right – *Clarity Wins* teaches you how to do that – and why you should).

Stop doing lots of things sorta okay and start doing a few things – or one thing – really well.

Craft a memorable message that's easy to pass along.

Then you'll start to see clients multiply.

Life is a muddle. But your work doesn't have to be. Clarity not only generates business, it feels great.

So stop fooling around and get to work on it.

-- *Josh Bernoff, author, Writing Without Bullshit*

Table of Contents

[Part 1: The Greatest Business Challenge](#)

Introduction: Knowing your enemy

- Chapter 1: Facing the Enemy**
- Chapter 2: Breaking through the Barriers**
- Chapter 3: Telling your Stories**
- Chapter 4: Speaking Human**

[Part 2: Creating Clarity](#)

Introduction: Choosing your niche

- Chapter 5: The Five Elements of Clarity**
- Chapter 6: Getting in your Zone**
- Chapter 7: Identifying your Bullseye Customer**
- Chapter 8: Finding your Superpower**
- Chapter 9: Defining your Niche**
- Chapter 10: Designing your Offerings**

[Part 3: Referral Networking](#)

Introduction: Activating your referral agents

- Chapter 11: Be Referral-Worthy**
- Chapter 12: Be a Questioner**
- Chapter 13: Be a Connection Agent**
- Chapter 14: Be Visible**
- Chapter 15: Cultivate Advocates**

[Part 4: Designing your Future](#)

Introduction: Designing a future of growing opportunities

- Chapter 16: Dominating Niches**
- Chapter 17: Visualizing Opportunities**
- Chapter 18: Gaining and Maintaining Focus**

Part 1: The Greatest Business Challenge

Introduction — Knowing your enemy

If you're in business, you're in a battle. You're advancing, retreating, strategizing, reacting, digging in, re-deploying — it can be exhausting in those trenches. As you look at your fluctuating bank balance, you're constantly reminded that the stakes are much higher than the playground disputes of your youth.

And when you feel like your side might be losing — well, join the club. Many of your fellow business leaders regularly feel the same way. Oftentimes, the setbacks seem to outnumber the breakthroughs.

Business-building is not for the faint of heart.

In an ideal world, a logical formula would get us straight to success. Something like this:

- You have something people need or want.
- You find the customers with those needs and communicate your offer clearly to them.
- You make a transaction that's a win-win, exchanging money for value.
- Lather, rinse, repeat.
- Retire to beachside resort.

Easy, right? Except we live in the real world, not fantasyland. Unrealistic success formulas rarely make the cash register ring, except for the endless stream of business snake oil salesmen hawking them.

According to the Small Business Administration, only half of all new establishments are still operating after 5 years and only 30% after 10 years. Businesses struggle to succeed simply because providers and buyers often fail to connect.

Why is that? Because we're not getting heard. We're not breaking through. We struggle to find the customers that need us, and they don't even know we exist. That smooth highway to success we dreamed about is actually an uneven track filled with hurdles and opposition. It's muddled out there.

The path between developing your product or service and earning revenue from a convinced customer is full of complications. Yes, there are exceptional companies that immediately attract customers and accelerate rapidly from the outset. But that's probably not us. While they get the headlines, you and I are more likely to be in the 99.9% of small businesses that do hand-to-hand battle to survive and grow every day.

Surprisingly, however, identifying the *main opposition* that 99.9% of all businesses face is actually a very easy task. We can, in the immortal advice of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, know our enemy. Who is that enemy? To understand what you're up against, let's look back at a familiar story, featuring an unfair battle with a truly nasty opponent.

Chapter 1 — Facing the Enemy

In the famous biblical story of David and Goliath, a shepherd boy armed only with a sling and a stone takes on a fearsome, armored giant. This massive opponent has been threatening and cursing David's countrymen for days, and Israel's army is shrinking from the battle. The game appeared to be over before it was set to begin.

Taking on such an opponent was inconceivable.

Then David shows up. Unlike his older brothers, he is still too young for the army. He owns no sword, no shield. Nonetheless, he takes one look at Goliath, listens to his loud bluster, and decides to take him on. Silly David — definitely not paying attention to the tribal oddsmakers.

David even refuses to wear his king's armor or to pick up any of the more advanced weaponry offered to him. Those weren't a "fit" for how he does battle. Instead, he goes out with a sling, some stones, and...his secret weapon.

No laser. No nuke. Instead, that upstart shepherd boy has one awesome skill. He could pinpoint, and hit, bullseyes.

David, though terribly outgunned, is really, really good at precision targeting. Everyone else sees an impregnable enemy, with shields up and weapons charged. David, however, sees a bullseye painted on Goliath's exposed forehead, just waiting to be penetrated by a simple stone from his sling.

“What the Israelites saw, from high on the ridge, was an intimidating giant. In reality, the very thing that gave the giant his size was also the source of his greatest weakness. There is an important lesson in that for battles with all kinds of giants. The powerful and the strong are not always what they seem.” — Malcolm Gladwell

Winning, for David, was not matching spear for spear or shield for shield. Bringing down the giant was about having the right weapon

and wielding it with accuracy. Small can take on big with the right targeting, and win. Game over.

While you don't actually have a laser painting a target on your chest right now, you are being targeted all the time in an effort to separate you from your money. The most obvious example is your Facebook feed, which tries to get you to click using precision-targeted advertising. The advertiser knows that the payoff will come, not by reaching everyone, but by appealing to the most susceptible and interested.

Targeting is a big deal in the battlefield of advertising. It is the key to defeating your Goliaths. And, as I'll show in this book, it is going to be your secret weapon in generating the one source of revenue that will most effectively fuel your business: referrals.

Here's the shocker: No matter what our business or marketplace, for big brands or small, we all face the *same* Goliath. This monster isn't hiding under the bed, it's right out there in the open, filling up the airwaves with its bluster. It's huge, and it's growing bigger every day. This massive, dominant giant can be overcome only with the skillful use of precision weapons.

What is this fearsome opponent?

It's the NOISE.

Every person we interact with is surrounded by a cloud of sensory input. Screens are everywhere. Media is a 24/7 companion. A veritable Babel of voices accompanied by a symphony of sonic stimulation makes our busy world a tough place for any of us to gain a hearing. We are doing battle with today's news, yesterday's business hassle, a chirping smartphone, tonight's dinner plans, and a thousand other distractions.

That unceasing static is what prevents people from hearing, and absorbing, our message. Noise is the primary hurdle we must overcome. We're always one click away from being ignored.

But wait — isn't our battle against competitor businesses with similar offerings? Actually, that's your smallest concern. Your true fight is not *against* other businesses, it's *for* the attention of your

audience. Every potential customer is continually surrounded by the competition of unceasing voices and sights and sounds, nearly all of which is *not* from your competitors. And a lot of that noise is pretty darn interesting.

So, the Goliath of noise, overloading the senses and brains of your audience, is your main competition. In fact, your messages, too, are just part of the background noise, until you find a way to rise above it and gain that most precious commodity of all: attention. That's the necessary first step to getting the right message to the right people.

As Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck wrote in their book, *The Attention Economy*: "Certainly the attention economy has laws of supply and demand. The most obvious one is that as the amount of information increases, the demand for attention increases. As Herbert Simon, a Nobel prize-winning economist put it, 'What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.'"

We live in an interconnected world of exploding information density where a million things are clamoring for our attention all the time. It's a way of life for all of us. Just think about all the distractions that derail *your* attention each hour, and you know that it's true. The statistics also bear witness to this reality.

According to Nielsen, in the first quarter of 2018, the average American spent 11 hours per day consuming non-print media — up more than an hour since 2015. And a study by Asurion concluded that the average American checks their smartphone eighty times per day. Estimates of exposure to advertising vary from 3,000 to 20,000 exposures per day. Not all of these are processed consciously, of course, but the amount of visual and auditory noise produced to try to reach each of our brains is staggering.

In fact, the average office worker gets only 11 minutes between interruptions, and it takes an average of 23 minutes for workers to get back on task after an interruption. Distractions are rampant in our work environments and exact a heavy toll on our ability to concentrate and perform.

To put it simply, people are overstimulated, overloaded, and are struggling to process the tsunami of sensory inputs that come our way every minute of every day.

Businesses trying to reach these overloaded customers fall into a common trap. To overcome the noise, they make even more noise — they shout louder! They overload their audiences with information and jargon and bullet points, instead of simple WIIFM (What's In It For Me) statements that focus on customer benefits. They are vague and indefinite about their exact offerings and their target clients. The investments we make in producing more fog and more noise are staggering, when we should really be focused on precision targeting.

Marketing consultant and educator Mark Schaefer recently coined the term “Content Shock” to describe the overwhelming amount of information that is continually multiplying online. Human beings simply do not have the time or the bandwidth to process the amount of content rushing at us.

External sources of noise are bad enough, but we each also constantly experience a swirl of interruption on the inside. Our restless minds are multitasking continuously. Like waves crashing on the shore, our thoughts, plans, and emotions collide with all that incoming input to create a constant din of distraction, eroding our ability to concentrate.

The noise is bad enough. But it's even worse than you think. We tend to carry around a delusion that people actually care about what we have to say. I hate to break it to you this bluntly, but — they don't.

Nobody cares about you, or your brand, or your company.

We're selfish. It's not you; it's me. I care about me. You're ... well, you're *irrelevant* until proven otherwise.

That sounds harsh, but it's reality. People care about themselves. Their job. Their family. Their feelings. Their future. Whatever you are offering is, at best, a means to an end. Unless you can help

me feel better, do better, and reach my goals, why would I give you a nanosecond of attention?

In fact, you remain buried in the rest of the noise until you're able to demonstrate that you are fixing a pain I feel or fulfilling a desire I have. Then maybe you'll get a hearing, *if* you can stand out from the clutter.

The big hurdle any business has to clear to get a hearing is the WIIFM barrier. If the audience doesn't quickly find a benefit that touches them (or someone they care about), they will tune out the message as useless noise. That means that you can have the best product or service out there, but if I don't feel the value, my ears and wallet remain closed.

The buyer is always tuned in to one radio station: WIIFM. The rest is filtered out as noise.

The ability of people to *not* hear us is astonishing. In my consulting business, I have sought to communicate my value proposition — clarity wins — repetitively and simply, with blog posts, videos, newsletters, workshops, podcasts; you name it, I've pushed it out there. Yet I'll sit down with someone who has been on my mailing list for years and will commonly get this query: "So, tell me. What exactly is it that you do?" And so often, it is in that eyeball-to-eyeball human connection, explaining the value proposition, where the message finally sinks in.

Up until then, it was easy to filter me out, my message obscured behind the wall of sound. Frequently, human-to-human contact is the only thing that breaks through the noise.

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This filtering reality brings us to another dimension of our immense challenge. Not only are your customers surrounded by noise, not only do they perceive you as irrelevant (until proven otherwise), but *you must also overcome the flood-brain barrier*.

The human brain, as a survival mechanism, filters out the flood of input relentlessly. There are barriers to keep our brains from

drowning in input. To understand this, let's briefly touch on a little-known aspect of practical brain science; one that provides the key to success for all of your sales and marketing endeavors.

The human brain is wonderfully equipped with sorting and prioritizing mechanisms to keep us sane in the midst of stimulation overload. It accomplishes this through a gatekeeper called the RAS (Reticular Activating System). The RAS consigns the vast majority of stimuli to the trash, just like an email program filtering out spam (but much, much more effectively).

The RAS is responsible for awareness, focus, and attention prioritization. Not surprisingly, it is also the conduit for fight-or-flight impulses. Every one of your customers is facing you with their RAS filter front-and-center. This marvelous piece of biological engineering is the primary hurdle in your quest to stand out, break through, and be remembered, so you have to understand what it's looking for. The RAS is attuned to focus on:

- What is new and interesting;
- What is clearly relevant;
- What is surprising, amusing, or frightening.

When you're sitting on an airplane, taxiing for takeoff, how many passenger brains do you think are tuned into to the flight attendants' messages about oxygen masks and inflatable life vests? It's all too familiar, and we don't believe it's truly relevant right now, so it becomes background chatter. Blah, blah, blah. We filter it out.

If your message is dull, undifferentiated, or difficult to comprehend, it's just static to be shunted to the trash. The RAS is attuned to grab onto that which is jarring, fresh, and clearly transmitting on the WIIFM frequency. The most effective politicians know that their audience is actually the voter's RAS, and they craft their messages to break through the noise. Forgettable is rarely electable.

This is why you need to have a differentiating message. If you are new, different, and proposing to solve a real pain or fulfill a cherished hope, you have a chance to be heard. Unfortunately, many businesses and professionals fall into the "we-do-that-too" trap of positioning themselves in the marketplace, which makes

them a forgettable commodity. Moving from the status of “just another x provider” to gaining the identity as a unique go-to resource is a challenge we’ll address in detail in Part 2 of this book.

The noise surrounds us. We’re irrelevant until proven otherwise. The brain is filtering us. These are formidable obstacles. But we can only win if we identify the real competition in the marketplace, and in the minds and hearts of our audience. We need the right weapons for the job of breaking through and standing out. How can we overcome the resistance?

Thirteen years ago, I went into business as a consultant helping others figure out their sweet spot and branding. I learned one powerful thing about how to differentiate: The most vital positioning and marketing achievement for every individual and business is gaining *clarity*.

Clarity is getting insight into the DNA level of your individual or company makeup.

Clarity is defining what you do best for your marketplace and identifying exactly what types of clients you’re seeking to serve. Clarity is being in touch with your unique differentiator(s) so that you’re not just another commodity provider. Clarity is wrapping simple and memorable words around your value and your offering.

Clarity is that 20/20 focus that cuts through the fog and lets you stand out from the noise. Clarity fuels effective marketing and selling.

But clarity is more than insight. It is also the secret key that unlocks the most powerful business-building activity you can engage in: generating useful referrals.

There is an endless stream of books on selling, marketing, social media, advertising, and branding. But how to activate referrals? That’s missing — even though everyone knows that the most effective and efficient way to develop business is through referrals. The best referrals are precision-targeted connections. That’s how David defeats Goliath in a noise-filled marketplace.

Business success is ultimately a form of win-win matchmaking. And we put much greater stock on matches suggested by people we trust. Those trusted referrals are the quickest path to putting money in the bank.

I have built my consulting practice around helping others gain clarity, with the goal that each individual and business becomes what I like to call “referral-ready.” That is, they can explain themselves so clearly, so succinctly in less than 60 seconds, that others can “get” their value proposition and know how to refer them.

Sound too good to be true? Well, based on my experience with countless business owners, consultants, and people in career transition, clarity is that one secret weapon that all of us can employ. I’ve repeatedly experienced the powerful impact of clarity-fueled positioning and clarity-fueled referrals in my networks.

Referral networking based on clarity is not theory for me. It’s my practice, my living, and my mission.

The content of this book grew out of more than 30 years of business practice, hundreds of blog posts, and endless hours of face-to-face consulting and coaching with a wide variety of professionals and businesses. Becoming clarity-fueled is, ultimately, a liberating exercise in gaining precise focus, then crafting the fewest possible words to achieve the biggest possible impact.

If you are *seeking to gain focus, communicate effectively, and grow your business*, this book is for you. While I’ve written the clarity principles to address the needs of small-to-medium-size business, they apply just as well to brand marketers, sales organizations, career transitioners, and even teachers, speakers, and pastors. That which is true in positioning and promoting a business also carries over into all areas of life, because we’re talking about skillfully using words (and, as you’ll discover, word *pictures*) to effectively reach and influence people.

It’s a noisy world out there and we cannot assume that people are hearing and understanding our message, let alone spreading it.

Here's what I'll be sharing with you toward that end:

In the rest of Part 1, I'll identify specific barriers to embracing your message so that you can move away from random acts of communication and toward a clarity-driven approach to making yourself heard.

Part 2 is your guide to distilling your message into key words and phrases that actually accomplish the goal: breaking through the noise and the mental barriers that prevent your message from taking root. We'll dig into the five elements of business clarity and how to arrive at a clear focus that informs both strategy and messaging.

Part 3 takes a fresh look at the power of networking through the lens of both referral-worthiness, as well as referral-readiness. Network-building is a great way to expand business opportunities if we have the right approach, including clear messaging, to equip others to recommend us.

Part 4 is about helping you design your future. As you gain clarity about your direction and message, new opportunities may open up outside of expected business models and roles. That can be both scary and exhilarating. This clarity-fueled mindset will be particularly valuable if you've always felt that you had to fit into the confining expectations of a business world designed by others.

One of the most radical concepts that you will come to embrace is the need — the *desirability* — to be “pigeonholed” in the minds of our hearers. I don't know how many times I've heard business people say, “we don't want to be pigeonholed!” I can assure you that, after reading this book, you will *strive* to be pigeonholed, and for good reason. Using clarity principles, you must design the space that you want to occupy in the mental real estate of others, which will lead to the most important result of all: business-building referrals.

I hope to take all that I've learned about clarity to help you succeed. The rest of this book will show you how to break through using succinct, vivid words that, like David's stone, allow you to go up against the giant. These distilled phrases — memory darts —

are designed to light up the RAS and gain you a place in the brains of your audience. You will be understood. You will be remembered. And all of this will bring you the greatest competitive advantage of all.

You will be referral-ready.

Let's discover how to break through, stand out, and win with clarity.

About the Author

Steve Woodruff has often been called the King of Clarity. It's as close to royalty as he's ever gotten.

He's passionate about helping people and businesses see themselves, and articulate themselves, accurately and clearly. Some would say obsessed. They'd be right.

Steve consults with major pharmaceutical companies on their training and communications initiatives, but his greatest joy is helping smaller companies succeed. Thirty-plus years in sales, marketing, leadership, and consulting roles, twelve of those as a solopreneur, have yielded many practical lessons about business success (and failure).

He was a contributing author to the Amazon best-selling book *Unstuck*, focused on breaking through the barriers to small business growth.

Little-known fact: Steve, at one time, aspired to be an astronomer. Then he ran into college calculus and physics. That experience provided needed clarity about a change in professional direction.

Steve grew up in Connecticut and did his undergraduate work at Vanderbilt University; he and his wife Sandy now reside in Franklin, TN. They have five sons.