

A FREE GUIDE FOR FOUNDERS & SMES

# Stop Talking About Yourself

The small business guide to messaging that actually makes people buy.

THE BENEFIT LADDER

THE VALUE PROPOSITION

THE THREE-TEST AUDIT

BY

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FREE GUIDE

# The Problem Nobody Admits To

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Most small business marketing fails before it's even seen - not because of budget, channel or timing, but because of what it says and who it's written for.

There is a specific kind of disappointment that most small business owners know but rarely talk about. You've built something real. You know it's good. You've invested in a website, put together some social content, maybe written a leaflet or two. And yet the response is underwhelming. Not nothing - but not what you expected either.

The instinct is to look outward for the problem. The market's tough. The timing isn't right. You need more budget, a better channel, a different platform. Maybe you need to post more often.

What's almost never considered is the possibility that the messaging itself is the problem. Not the channel carrying it. Not the frequency. The actual words - what they say, what they emphasise, who they're written for.

This guide is about that problem. Specifically, it's about the most common messaging failure in small business marketing: writing from the inside out. Describing your business from your own perspective rather than your customer's. Talking about what you do instead of what they get. Focusing on your features instead of their outcomes. Leading with your story when they're looking for their solution.

The fix isn't complicated, but it does require a willingness to set aside the way you naturally think about your business and start thinking about it the way a stranger does. What follows is a practical framework for doing exactly that.

# The Inside-Out Problem

Open almost any small business website and you'll find the same thing: a paragraph or two about how long the business has been trading, what services it offers, and how passionate the team is about what they do. Maybe a mission statement. Maybe some bullet points listing the products or specialisms.

None of this is wrong, exactly. But almost none of it is written for the customer. It's written for the business - a natural expression of pride in what's been built, organised around what the owner knows rather than what the reader needs to hear. This is the inside-out problem. Marketing that starts from the business's perspective and hopes the customer can find themselves in it somewhere.

**01****Features, not benefits**

"We stock over 3,000 products" is a feature. "Everything your pet needs, always in stock" is a benefit. Features describe the business. Benefits describe what the customer gets.

**02****"We" more than "you"**

Count the uses of each in your existing marketing. In inside-out messaging, "we" almost always wins. The customer registers, at some level, that this isn't really about them.

**03****What you do, not what changes**

"We provide grooming services" describes a service. "Your pet comes back genuinely cared for" describes an outcome. Customers don't buy services. They buy the change those services produce.

## Why this happens - and what it costs

The inside-out problem isn't a character flaw. It's a natural consequence of being too close to what you've built. You understand your business from the inside - the effort it took, the expertise it required, the range and depth of what you offer. Writing about it from the inside is the path of least resistance.

Your customer doesn't have that context. They're not evaluating your business on its own terms - they're asking a simpler question: is this for me, and does it solve my problem? Inside-out messaging answers a question the customer isn't asking. Outside-in messaging answers the one they are.

Unclear or generic messaging doesn't just fail to persuade - it actively creates doubt. A customer who can't immediately understand why your homepage is relevant to them doesn't dig deeper. They leave. Messaging that doesn't land in the first few seconds doesn't get a second chance.

# What Your Customer Actually Needs

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It's not what they say. The gap between stated needs and real motivations is where most messaging goes wrong - and where the best messaging begins.

When someone walks into an independent pet store, they might say they're looking for a particular brand of dog food. That's the stated need. But behind it sits a series of deeper motivations: they want their dog to be healthy, they don't want the guilt of feeding something harmful, they want the reassurance of someone who actually knows what they're talking about. They might also want to feel like a good owner - someone who takes this seriously enough to seek out a proper pet shop rather than just ordering online.

None of those motivations are in the stated need. But all of them are available to inform the messaging.

## The 5x Why in practice

Take any stated customer need and ask "why" five times in succession. Each answer gets you one layer deeper toward the real motivation. A customer walks in asking for a specific dog food brand:

**Why 1** The vet recommended it for digestive issues.

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**Why 2** Watching the dog be uncomfortable makes them feel helpless and guilty.

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**Why 3** They chose this dog - they feel responsible. They worry they've been feeding the wrong thing for months.

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**Why 4** The dog is a daily companion since the kids left home. Its wellbeing genuinely matters emotionally.

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**Why 5** They need someone to confirm they're making the right choice. They want a real person to tell them it's going to be okay.

The stated need was a specific product. The real need is reassurance, trust and the removal of guilt. Those are very different things to write messaging around - and far more powerful ones.

**What this means in practice:** A pet store that understands the real need doesn't just say "we stock thousands of products." It says "expert advice on everything your pet needs - because the right choice matters." The product range is still there. But it's framed by the thing the customer actually cares about: making the right choice for an animal they love.

# The Benefit Ladder

The benefit ladder is a framework for climbing from what you offer to why it matters. It has four rungs, and most small businesses never make it past the second one. Understanding why each rung exists - and what it takes to climb to the next one - is where the real work of messaging begins.

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## Feature

What a product or service is or has. "Premium grooming equipment." "Locally sourced natural treats." Features are where most small business marketing starts and ends. They're easy to write because they describe things that exist. The problem: a feature on its own asks the customer to do the work of figuring out why it matters. Most won't bother.

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## Functional Benefit

What the feature does for the customer in practical terms. "A finish that lasts longer." "Treats your dog will actually enjoy." This requires a genuine shift in perspective - from what we have to what you get. For every feature in your marketing, ask: what does this actually mean for the person on the other side of it?

EB

## Emotional Benefit

How achieving the functional benefit makes the customer feel. "The confidence your pet is properly cared for." This is where messaging becomes genuinely persuasive. Most businesses find this rung uncomfortable - it feels presumptuous. It isn't. It's accurate. People don't buy products. They buy the way those things make them feel. Ignoring that isn't modesty - it's leaving money on the table.

IB

## Identity Benefit

What choosing this says about the customer - to themselves and to others. "The kind of owner who takes this seriously." This is the most powerful and most neglected rung. Identity is the deepest driver of purchase decisions. Messaging that speaks to identity doesn't just attract customers - it attracts loyal ones who feel their choice reflects something real about who they are.

**Why most businesses stop at rung two.** Feature and functional copy feels professionally safe - hard to be accused of overclaiming when you're describing what actually exists. Emotional and identity copy requires confidence. It makes claims about how people feel and who they are. Push through that discomfort. The brands customers feel genuinely loyal to are almost always operating at these levels.

# Climbing the Ladder: Pawfect Corner

Let's apply the ladder to the Pawfect Corner grooming service and be honest about why each rung matters, not just what it says.

## FEATURE

Professional grooming for dogs and cats, using premium salon-grade products, carried out by trained groomers with ten years of combined experience.

*Accurate - but asks the customer to do all the interpretive work. The feature exists, the meaning isn't yet there.*

## FUNCTIONAL BENEFIT

Your pet comes back genuinely clean, properly trimmed and comfortable - not just surface-washed and rushed through. The finish lasts, and your pet isn't stressed by the process.

*Now the customer can picture something real. The feature is translating into something tangible they can recognise from experience.*

## EMOTIONAL BENEFIT

You stop worrying about whether you're doing enough. You drop them off aware that it's got out of hand, and you pick them up feeling like you've properly looked after them. That feeling - of having got it right - is what you're actually buying.

*The product is still grooming. But what's promised is relief from guilt. Any owner who has felt bad about their dog's coat will recognise this - and want to be in that better emotional state.*

## IDENTITY BENEFIT

You're the kind of owner who takes their pet's care seriously enough to go to a proper groomer - not because you're being judged, but because it matters to you that they're properly looked after. That says something about you, and it should.

*This is where genuine loyalty is built. It's affirming something about the customer's values and their relationship with their animal. An owner who connects with this won't shop around on price. They've already decided what kind of owner they are.*

# Writing a Value Proposition That Isn't Generic

A value proposition is the plain-English answer to the question every new customer is asking: why you, and why now? It isn't a tagline, a slogan or a mission statement. Most fail for one of three reasons: too broad, too focused on process rather than outcome, or written for the business rather than the customer.

## The four components

### WHO DO YOU SERVE?

Not everyone - a specific type of customer with a specific situation. "Pet owners who want expert advice and genuinely personal service, not a warehouse experience."

### WHAT PROBLEM DO YOU SOLVE?

The real problem, not the product category. "The frustration of not knowing whether you're making the right choices for your pet, and the guilt that comes with that uncertainty."

### HOW DO YOU SOLVE IT DIFFERENTLY?

What makes your approach distinct from the realistic alternatives. "We give you actual answers from people who are trained - not a checkout assistant who's also selling garden furniture."

### WHAT'S THE OUTCOME?

What changes for the customer as a result. "You leave knowing you've made the right call. That quiet background worry of not doing enough goes quiet."

### ✗ BEFORE - INSIDE OUT

*"Pawfect Corner is your local independent pet store, offering a wide range of premium pet food, accessories and grooming services. We've been serving the community since 2020 and pride ourselves on our friendly, knowledgeable team."*

### ✓ AFTER - OUTSIDE IN

*"For pet owners who want to get it right - not just get it done - Pawfect Corner offers expert advice, quality products and professional grooming from people who genuinely know what they're talking about. No upselling. No guesswork. Just the right answer for your specific animal."*

**The one-sentence test:** Once you've written your value proposition, hand it to someone who has never heard of your business and ask two questions: who is this for, and why would they choose this over the alternatives? If they can answer both clearly and quickly, it's working. If they hesitate or give vague answers, it needs more work. Most first drafts fail this test. That's the point of running it.

**Where it should actually live:** Once written, your value proposition should inform your homepage headline, social media bio, email newsletter opening, the way you describe the business in conversation and the pitch you give when someone asks what you do. The core idea - who, problem, difference, outcome - should be recognisable across all of them. A founder who has done this work properly finds that the rest of the copy almost writes itself.

# The Positioning Statement

Positioning is your claimed territory in the customer's mind. It's not your logo, your brand colours or your tagline - those are expressions of positioning. Positioning itself is the specific place you're trying to occupy relative to the alternatives available to your customer.

Most small businesses skip this entirely, treating it as a corporate exercise that doesn't apply to them. This is a mistake. Without a clear positioning statement, every piece of content you create is unanchored. It might be good. It might even be persuasive. But it won't consistently reinforce the same idea, because there's no agreed idea for it to reinforce.

## A simple positioning template

For **[specific who]**, who **[specific problem or situation]**, **[business name]** provides **[specific solution]**, unlike **[the realistic alternatives]**, because **[the genuine reason you're different]**.

Applied to Pawfect Corner:

*"For pet owners in and around Stonebridge who want expert, personalised advice rather than a supermarket shelf and a self-checkout, Pawfect Corner provides knowledgeable guidance, quality products and professional grooming from people who genuinely care about animals - unlike the national chains or the online warehouses - because we're independent, trained and answerable to our community rather than to a head office three hundred miles away."*

That statement will never appear on the website verbatim. But once it's written, it becomes the lens through which every piece of marketing gets evaluated. Does this content reinforce the positioning? If yes, it's on strategy. If no, it probably isn't worth running.

## What to do with it once it's written

Keep it internal. Share it with anyone who writes content or makes decisions about marketing - including any agency, freelancer or social media manager you work with. Without it, external support defaults to generic. With it, they have a specific idea to build from.

Revisit it annually - not to change it on a whim, but to check whether the market has shifted, the competition has changed, or the customer's situation has evolved in ways that require it to move with them. The positioning statement is the document that makes all your other marketing more consistent and more effective, without ever being seen by a customer.

# The Three-Test Messaging Audit

The frameworks above are most powerful when used to create new messaging from scratch. But most businesses already have messaging in place. These three tests give you a structured way to audit what you already have and identify what needs fixing first. Run all three on your homepage.

## 1 The Stranger Test

Find someone who has no familiarity with your business. Show them your homepage for thirty seconds, then take it away and ask: what does this business do, who is it for, and why would someone choose it over the alternatives?

A passing result is clear, specific, accurate answers within thirty seconds. A failing result is hesitation, vagueness or answers that could apply to any business in your category. Most businesses are surprised by how much their customers are having to work to understand something that feels completely obvious to the person who built it. That gap - between how clear it feels from the inside and how unclear it reads from the outside - is the inside-out problem made visible.

## 2 The So-What Test

Read your homepage copy aloud, sentence by sentence. After each sentence, ask: "so what?" The answer is the benefit. If you can answer it clearly, the sentence is earning its place. If the answer is vague or nonexistent, the sentence is inside-out copy and needs rewriting or removing.

"We stock over 3,000 products from leading brands." So what? "So you'll find what you're looking for, including the brands your vet recommended." Working. "We are passionate about providing the best possible experience." So what? No answer that isn't vague or self-congratulatory. That sentence can go.

## 3 The Swap Test

Take your key messages and replace your business name with a competitor's. If the copy still makes sense, it isn't differentiated enough. "Friendly, experienced staff who love animals." Swap the logo - still works for every independent pet store in the country. "Independent advice from trained specialists who know your pet's name - and yours." Swap the logo - it now sounds wrong attached to a chain, because chains genuinely can't deliver it. That's differentiated messaging. It stakes a claim only an independent store can make credibly.

# Pawfect Corner in Action

Sarah Okonkwo opened Pawfect Corner four years ago in Stonebridge, a market town of around 28,000 people with a strong preference for independent businesses over chains. The shop carries food, accessories and healthcare products for dogs, cats and small animals. The online store ships locally and nationally. The grooming suite - added eighteen months ago - has become one of their most popular services, mostly through word of mouth.

The business is profitable and growing, but Sarah has always felt the marketing undersells what Pawfect Corner actually is. The website was built quickly. The social content is inconsistent. She can see the homepage was written about the business rather than for the customer - but she's never had a framework for fixing it. She runs through the process.

## STEP 1 - THE 5X WHY ON HER BEST CUSTOMERS

Sarah thinks about the customers who come back most reliably. They're not bargain hunters - they're dog and cat owners who treat their animals as genuine family members, concerned about ingredients, interested in advice and willing to pay more for something they trust.

She takes one regular's stated need - "I need a grain-free food for my dog's sensitive stomach" - and runs it through the 5x Why. By the fifth level, the real need is clear: not the product, but the reassurance of someone confirming she's making the right choice. The quiet removal of guilt. Sarah writes that down and keeps it visible for everything that follows.

## STEP 2 - CLIMBING THE BENEFIT LADDER FOR THE GROOMING SERVICE

Sarah picks the grooming service because it's the one she finds hardest to write about. She works through each rung deliberately rather than jumping to the output.

At the feature level: she's always written this. Accurate, but asks the customer to do all the interpretive work. At functional benefit: she can picture a customer nodding - they've seen what a properly groomed dog looks like. At emotional benefit: it clicks. She thinks about the embarrassment in her customers' voices when they apologise for how bad the coat has got. That's the feeling she's selling against - not the wash, the relief. At identity: she sits with this one. Her most loyal customers aren't just buying a service - they're reinforcing something about their relationship with their animals. The grooming appointment is partly a practical necessity and partly an act of care. Her messaging has never acknowledged that. It does now.

### STEP 3 - WRITING THE VALUE PROPOSITION

What she discovered climbing the ladder directly informs what she writes here. The customer's real need - reassurance, trust, the removal of guilt - shapes the who, the problem and the outcome. The way Pawfect Corner is genuinely different - independent, expert, honest even when it costs a sale - shapes the differentiation. She pulls it together:

*"For pet owners who want to get it right - not just get it cheaper - Pawfect Corner offers expert advice, trusted products and professional grooming from people who know your pet, not just your postcode. Independent. Trained. Actually on your side."*

She runs the one-sentence test on her partner. He reads it and says immediately: "It's for people who care properly about their pets and don't trust the big chains." First try. Working. She then maps where it needs to live: homepage headline, Instagram bio, the way she introduces the business when networking, email footer. The value proposition isn't a document that sits in a drawer - it's the thing that brings everything else into alignment.

### STEP 4 - WRITING THE POSITIONING STATEMENT

*"For pet owners in and around Stonebridge who want trusted expert advice and genuinely personal service, Pawfect Corner provides knowledgeable guidance, quality products and professional grooming - unlike the national chains or the online warehouses - because we're independent, trained and invested in your pet's long-term wellbeing rather than in hitting a quarterly sales target."*

She doesn't put this on the website. She prints it out, pins it above her desk, and sends it to the freelancer who manages her social content. Every post, every caption, every promotion gets held against it. Does it reinforce the positioning? If not, it doesn't run.

### STEP 5 - RUNNING THE THREE-TEST AUDIT ON THE OLD HOMEPAGE

**Stranger test:** Her neighbour reads it for thirty seconds. "It's a pet shop with grooming. Seems nice. I couldn't really tell you why I'd choose it over the one near the retail park." Fail.

**So-what test:** "Pawfect Corner is your local independent pet shop." So what? "We've been open since 2020." So what? "We stock a wide range of food, accessories and treats." So what? "Our friendly team is always on hand to help." So what? Four sentences, zero useful answers.

**Swap test:** She replaces Pawfect Corner with the chain pet store two towns over. Every sentence still works. Every single one. Total fail.

# Before and After: The Homepage Opening

**X BEFORE**

*"Pawfect Corner is your local independent pet shop, open since 2020 and proud to serve the Stonebridge community. We stock a wide range of food, accessories and grooming products for dogs, cats and small animals. Our friendly, knowledgeable team is always happy to help."*

**✓ AFTER**

*"Your pet deserves better than a shelf and a self-checkout. Pawfect Corner is Stonebridge's independent pet specialist - stocking the products we actually recommend, offering the advice you actually need, and treating your animal like the individual they are. Because getting it right matters more than getting it cheap."*

Same business. Same shop. Same team. Completely different orientation - and a version that would fail the swap test, which is exactly the point.

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## The Work Starts on Your Homepage

Run the so-what test on your first three sentences right now. If you can't answer "so what?" clearly after each one, those sentences are inside-out copy and your visitors are bouncing off them every day. Rewrite them using what you've learned about your customer's real motivations, the rung of the benefit ladder they actually respond to, and the value proposition you've now built.

Then apply the stranger test. If the answers are clear, specific and accurate, the messaging is working. If they hesitate, there's still more work to do.

Your messaging is never fully finished. Markets shift, language evolves, competitors move. The frameworks in this guide give you a repeatable process, not a one-time output. Come back to the benefit ladder when you launch a new service. Rerun the three tests when you update the website. The business owners who communicate most effectively aren't the ones who wrote the best copy once - they're the ones who built the habit of asking the right questions consistently.

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*"Inside-out messaging answers a question the customer isn't asking. Outside-in messaging answers the one they are."*

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WANT TO GO DEEPER?

# The Full Framework

The benefit ladder, the value proposition and the positioning statement in this guide are drawn from a broader framework - one that covers not just how to get your messaging right, but how to build marketing that is structured, deliberate and genuinely effective from the ground up.

If this guide has been useful and you want to understand how the messaging work connects to market definition, brand, acquisition, conversion and retention, that's all set out in *The Big Brand Blueprint*.



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## The Big Brand Blueprint: How Startups and Small Businesses Can Win Big

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More than twenty years leading marketing across some of the world's most recognised technology and cybersecurity brands, including CrowdStrike and RSA Security. Built and scaled marketing functions across the UK, Europe and globally, working at director level throughout his career.

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