

A Market Perspective of GAO— Insights and Opportunities

The concepts of market planning can prove useful to GAO production managers. The basic tools described in this article can strengthen the relationship between GAO's vast productive output and the usefulness of its products to both the Congress and agencies of the executive branch.

A market orientation requires some departure from the traditional ways of looking at how GAO conducts its operations. It involves viewing the GAO mission more in terms of changing customers, changing products, and changing strategies.

Market is no magic word. Its roots are based in a simple response to the competitive environment in which all modern enterprise finds itself. Needs to plan, to know users, to evaluate results, and to have a production system organized to synthesize these things—all are prerequisite to sustained organizational growth.

Marketing in Government is the same as in business: supplying groups of customers with the means of satisfying needs *customers* think are important. In fact, no group of Government activity exists that cannot be described in terms of a group of customers to be

served, and a product or service rendered. Government is a process of doing things *for* people, not *to* people, which they feel a need to have done. Government performs these services as long as, and only as long as, someone is willing to pay for them.

There can be little difficulty envisioning a parallel of this popular market concept and a concept of the GAO market mission—to serve and assist the Congress. GAO is responsible to the Nation and to itself as a professional organization to serve and assist the Congress by providing useful information products which help the Congress to carry out its legislative and oversight functions.

The Competitive Congressional Information Market

The Congress does not operate in an informational vacuum but seeks

Mr. Cass is a supervisory auditor with the Seattle regional office. He has been with GAO since 1969. He has a B.S. degree in marketing from Indiana University and an M.B.A. degree in marketing from the University of Oregon.

sources of knowledge to inform its membership about particular legislative issues. Competition is intense for expert and prestigious informational sources. So strong is the need for information and so persuasive is its

effect on the legislative decisionmaking process that vast amounts of manpower and money are used to supply these needs to the Congress. Among the agents who offer information to the congressional market are:

*Congressional Information
Sources Other Than GAO*

	<i>Popular Examples</i>
Special interest groups	Sierra Club, NAACP, VFW, National Council of Churches
Industrial associations	National Association of Manufacturers, the auto industry, the tobacco industry
Professional associations	The American Medical Association, the American Bankers Association, the National Home Study Council
Election results, correspondence from constituents, and opinion polls	Letters from home, Gallup Poll, local elections
Testimony of experts	Edward Teller, Admiral Rickover
Executive departments	Department of Defense, Attorney General's decisions
Independent research	Ralph Nader & associates, Brookings Institution, scholars
Government-sponsored research	The Rand Corporation, Battelle Memorial Institute, universities
The news media	Press, radio, T.V., periodicals
Congressional research	Congressional Research Service, committee staff research

To operate effectively in this highly competitive information market, GAO must continue to do more than rely on its charter and position in Government. It must continue to make substantial contributions to congressional decisionmaking by continually improving its capabilities as a prime source of congressional information.

One must immediately recognize that GAO produces information and exerts an impact that extends beyond

the reports it issues to the Congress. GAO information products are a complex total of many types of constructive and productive efforts. For example, the Comptroller General's decisions, addresses, and advice; the discipline imposed on executive agencies by GAO auditors' presence; and the Office's congressional testimony and dissemination of public information are all influential products developed in fulfilling the GAO mission.

GAO creates these types of information "products" and more. But to continue to make substantial contributions to congressional decisionmaking, it must continually improve its competitive position as a leading manufacturer in the congressional information market. One way to do this is for GAO to continue to increase the market value of its information products by better managing the market process.

Managing the Marketing Process— A GAO Perspective

To keep its position secure, GAO must continue to identify, produce, and distribute information products to a broad market. GAO may increase its impact on congressional decisionmaking by market management and its effectiveness by increased attention to planning products for users. A quick reflection on the way some reports are now designed points to a major marketing consideration: variations in traditional GAO production and marketing processes are rare.

Product planners must always clearly state what end products are desired from each assignment so that frequent changes will not be made in assignment objectives or perspectives. Project teams must know in advance what constructive actions they are seeking, then design the types of information products which are most likely to generate such actions among product users.

Without discussing an anthology of marketing principles or a shopping list of elements and definitions, the follow-

ing important elements of this process are listed for the purpose of exposition.

Major Elements of GAO Market Management

1. Product pricing
2. Product packaging
3. Production distribution
4. Product promotion
5. Product timing

A variety of these time-tested tools can give the product planners conceptual assistance toward defining their product objectives. A brief summary discussion of these concepts follows.

Product Pricing (Cost)

Pricing can be measured most conveniently and perhaps most meaningfully in man-days spent on the product. These man-days to be spent can further be weighted by grade (talent and experience to be spent) to determine cost. The amount of all the market variables—planning, timing, distributing, promoting, doing, and packaging will affect the cost of producing the finished product. Other operational costs, such as travel and administrative overhead, can be included if additional refinement is in order. The amount of these planned costs can then be compared to the anticipated benefits of the assignment in terms of service to the Congress or assistance to the executive branch. Measurement of the benefits is at present a value judgment outside the scope of this article.

Product Packaging

Bound reports to the Congress are obviously not the only way to package GAO products. Other product packages may be more appropriate and may heighten the impact of the reports when combined with other elements of marketing management. For instance, an audiovisual report to a committee, after the survey, may prove to be more timely and less costly. It may further whet congressional appetites for a full-scale review or lead to quick corrective action.

When combined with the many possible distributions, promotions, and timings, four possible packages give GAO marketeers a wide range of discretionary products:

1. Oral reports and presentations.
2. Audiovisual reports (video tapes, slides, and flip charts).
3. Agency management letters.
4. Congressional reports.

Product Distribution

The Congress may be GAO's target market, but frontal assaults are not always most tactful or productive. Since GAO is interested in fulfilling overall mission and objectives, lateral movements may often accomplish more at less cost. Therefore GAO market management can use a variety of distribution channels to reach its primary target market:

1. The Congress.
2. The congressional committee.
3. The committee staff.
4. The individual Congressman.
5. The agency administrators.

Product Promotion— Developing Congressional Demand

More powerful promotional means are available to GAO. The desire for GAO products can be appropriately heightened, employing a variety of promotions as jobs progress. The concept of a "psychological promotional escalation" can coincide with GAO's readiness to report and the current price spent on a given product. Briefly, this concept means bringing the user along before and as the product is in production. This approach gives the user time to accept a product that GAO has prepared him to anticipate. Proper use of the concept can diminish the risk of user rejection or disinterest in the final product.

An essential assumption leading into this reasoning is that often the producer is more aware of the importance, or impact, of his product than is the potential user. Therefore it is a GAO responsibility to increase awareness and interest within the user, whether he is an agency official or an interested Congressman. GAO need not limit promotion to those products already wanted but can also discover, develop, and promote new products for new users (develop discretionary products). Promotional activities do vary widely within GAO, since sensitivity to congressional discontent, dissonance, and felt-need for legislative or executive action elicits varying responses in different operating groups.

Product Timeliness— A Conceptualization of Time

Every creation of God and man is evidence of the existence and value of

time. Every living thing experiences a birth and a death. The creations of man are also only transitory—germinating in the mind, built with the hands, and diminished, invalidated, or destroyed by time—nothing endures.

Transferring this concept of time from the metaphysical to the physical, one can discover that the eternal theme also exists for GAO creations. Some information products are too soon, some are too late, but how many are just right? As in our daily lives there are appropriate times to do some things and inappropriate times to do others, there are opportune and inopportune times for GAO to issue its information products.

Managing for the Market— What Is Needed?

The real market for a GAO product is only an assumption until that product is tested in the market; i.e., put to use by the Congress or by agency officials. The actual market quite often is different than that envisioned. It is therefore important to identify prime markets for embryonic issues soon after they are discovered so GAO can aim anticipated products where they will do the most good and design them for maximum usefulness to decision-makers.

The challenge embodied in the attempt to create the best possible information products (optimal in the sense of being the most desirable product GAO is capable of offering) will always require early modification in the design stage of product development. The design of this product should

correspond with what is known of the primary user/consumer perception of the issues to be reported. Don't guess, ask him! The design within which the product is being developed will yield optimal user satisfactions only if the GAO designer first knows:

1. What kinds of products will be of most value to the users.
2. What satisfactions the users seek from these products and the priorities of these satisfactions.
3. How the timing of product issuance or interim promotional disclosures will enhance user satisfactions.
4. How a variety of product packages and presentations will affect user satisfactions.
5. What degree of product refinement is actually needed to produce these identified satisfactions.

GAO's information products must satisfy some external GAO need; otherwise they would be a mere exercise in production. GAO must continually develop advanced-market knowledge on potentially reportable issues, maintain continuing knowledge of user expectations and preferences, and provide ongoing analyses to evaluate the changing impacts of various product timings, promotions, and packages.

Continuing investigations are needed even when GAO assumes to know what information others desire. Because even when it thinks it knows what will satisfy the markets, it may be unaware of unfilled market needs. To continue to insure the effectiveness of its products, GAO must continue to

improve intelligence and liaison procedures which better enable it to:

1. Rank congressional wants, needs, and desires by committees (market survey).
2. Establish closer working relationships with committeemen and their staffs (sales contacts).
3. Assign operating groups to work with specific committees and subcommittees on major national issues (market segmentation).
4. Rank each issue, within each operating group, in a priority of anticipated information products (put first things first).
5. Promote to committees issues that appear most appropriate, significant, and appealing (put best foot forward).
6. Develop strategies for marketing each potential product (plan).

Conclusions

To test the market power of your latest product, ask yourself the question, "Did it bear fruit in the market?"; that is, did the information

package you developed reach consumer hands and minds and evoke attention, interest, and discussion; and did it influence congressional or executive decisions? Whatever your response, you may find some of the conceptual tools described in this article immediately useful and applicable to your present job.

The decisionmaking abilities of the Congress and the executive branch can be no stronger than the information available at specific times, at specific places, in specific packages. GAO, as Congress' legally prescribed investigative and evaluative arm, is ideally situated to provide the types of information products needed to improve the quality of Government.

A market-oriented approach to GAO production management has and can continue to provide decisive advantages in the struggle to constantly improve the quality of GAO service. To produce without market awareness is simply to let forces other than professional reasoning, talent, and experience shape GAO's contribution to the Congress and to the Nation.

A Limitation of Literature Searches

It is a truism in public administration that many of the people who know the most about particular facets of this field are, because of the responsible posts they hold, usually too busy to write. But wisdom based on the actual experiences of top-level practitioners is required to give substance to theoretical and philosophic study.

Albert H. Rosenthal
In preface to "Public Science Policy
and Administration" (1973)