



FIND *your* **NATURAL** **NICHE**

BY TOM DAVIDSON

FROM LITTLE-KNOWN GENERALIST
To
WELL-KNOWN EXPERT

A Personal Case Study

I was 14 again, with a nylon harness around my waist and a soft rope passing slowly through carabineers at my crotch. As the crew leader, I was the first to rappel, just as I had been the first to climb. The rest of the boys—standing safely at the bottom of the cliff—were shouting instructions, “Relax...lean back...keep your knees straight...let the rope out faster!” as if they had done it a thousand times and this was the most natural thing in the world to do. Eventually, we all made the trip safely up and down the rock face that day, but I’ll never forget the feeling of the first few steps over the edge: scary, clumsy and uncomfortable. After that, it was just plain fun! That’s what it’s like to transition from unknown generalist to well-known expert (scary, clumsy and uncomfortable), but after that, it’s just plain fun ... and much easier to market. At first, it seems like a leap of faith but it’s really what I call a *leap of focus*.

For more than 10 years, I tried to get business from anyone, anywhere. How many of these tactics sound familiar?

- Working 24 hours a day, seven days a week for 365 days a year to scare up bits and pieces of work to keep the lights on but not much more.
- Throwing marketing ideas at the wall to see what sticks, only to find them expensive and ineffective.
- Tweeting into the wind, trying to get visible in the growing world

of social media and beyond.

- Spreading business cards like confetti and giving free speeches to anyone who promised “lots of potential clients” in the audience.

It took a while, but I was ready to stop the madness.

Finding My Natural Niche

Finding and committing to my natural target market may have been the hardest part. My topic is not unique and neither am I—at least I didn’t think so. I’m no celebrity, hero, athlete or business tycoon. I’m just an expert on a mission to help someone.

I was stuck like this for a decade until I attended an *Authentic You* retreat by Glenna Salsbury, CSP, CPAE. The lessons from her “archaeological dig” exercise lasted years beyond that three-day weekend. Looking to my past for evidence of one-of-a-kind stories improved my content and put me on a path to discover my natural target market.

Hiding in Plain Sight

What makes me different as a speaker was not a fact, feat or feature but a pattern from my past, one that was obvious to many—including my mastermind group—but completely invisible or ignored by me. I was too close to see it.

I’d grown up outdoors, learning about the environment and teaching others what I knew. My Boy Scout troop didn’t go camping often enough or in cold-enough weather, so my buddies and I planned long backpacking trips, rock climbing, caving and river-float adventures on our own.

This led to a certain skill set at a



Tom Davidson focuses on the great outdoors.

young age, and that led to a series of hobbies, degrees and job opportunities with a pattern: Eagle Scout, trail guide, survival instructor, professional forester, scoutmaster, firefighter, training manager, public affairs officer, organization development consultant and human resource executive. My niche was hiding in plain sight all along: leadership development for natural resource professionals.

Seeing the Forest and the Trees

At the center of my bullseye market are foresters and their organizations, technically trained outdoor professionals whom I knew well. Like other technically trained experts, they are great at what they do, but they didn’t learn leadership in biochemistry class!

I drew a mind map with “foresters” at the center and quickly sketched a complex web of organizations that employ foresters, including hundreds of state and federal agencies, dozens of forest products and professional associations, and a commercial forest products industry that ranks in the top 10 in 46 states.

And that’s just the *center* of the bullseye! The rest of it includes



STEPS TO TAKING THE LEAP

- 1 Join or start a mastermind group to challenge your thinking and support your success.
- 2 Embrace more of your whole-life experience and own it as much as you do your current expertise.
- 3 Match what you do now with what you did then.
- 4 Make over your marketing to fit your new niche.
- 5 Give back to your target market's associations, conferences and publications; start locally and grow globally.
- 6 Maintain your generic identity where you already have a client base, but devote your time, energy and resources into your niche business.
- 7 Seek help from other NSA members and other service providers, and take fuller advantage of what this organization is all about.

closely affiliated outdoor professions such as wildlife conservationists, soil scientists, water-quality experts, fire protection services, pathologists, agronomists, biometricians and all the vendors that supply these professionals and their industries.

Still, I had my doubts and psychological barriers. For example, I minimized the value of my knowledge and experience in this field—what subject matter experts call the curse of knowledge. I was also concerned the market would be too frugal for my fees. It has been a challenge, but one that I am overcoming with proven value. Sometimes, you need to get out of your own way and just forge ahead.

Retooling My Natural Brand

After three previous attempts over 10 years to make my brand stick and stick out, and after finally owning my new target market, I was determined to make this makeover work. It would mean crafting messages, creating images and framing my offers in the right ways, in plain English and in terms that made sense to the professionals I knew so well.

As I started to write, the words, images and analogies flowed easily. The process needed polishing, but the momentum and flow came easily, another sign that I had chosen the right target.

While I already had traction at the time, I enlisted the help of David Newman, an NSA expert in small business marketing, for speed and direction. That's exactly what I got, because in just six months, I accomplished the following with his help and others:

- Created a meaningful new brand name identity and tagline: "Leadership Nature - *Because Great Managers Don't Grow on Trees.*"
- Developed product and service offerings that were more powerfully organized and written based on solutions to their most painful

leadership problems, not the tools I use to solve them.

- Launched a new website (LeadershipNature.com) with messages, images and resources navigation so that any visitors from my target market can easily see how well I know their world and demonstrate my readiness to help them.
- Customized one-sheets: one for my ongoing legacy business (DavidsonLeadership.com) intended for generic audiences, and one for my new targeted audience with Leadership Nature.
- Redesigned training with simulations, examples and exercises specifically tailored to natural resource professionals.
- Co-authored and published a targeted leadership assessment profile for this audience called the *RangeFinder™*.
- Converted my printed book into an e-book and started using it as an item of value for collecting emails for my newsletter and more.
- Secured a regular column on leadership in my professional association's news journal.
- Selected a targeted few marketing activities (what David Newman calls "Money Making Activities") that I could most easily and practically execute on a regular basis.

Reaping the Harvest

What happened was quite remarkable to me, but probably not surprising to the marketing experts who specialize in building speakers' businesses. And while some of the components came faster than others, the overall results were astonishing:

- Achieved much greater and more meaningful visibility with my best-fit client pool.
- Overcame most natural barriers to entry, resistance and objections more quickly and naturally.
- Found networking to be painless and productive.
- Got more spin-off business from speaking engagements.
- Received more volunteered referrals and collected testimonials more easily than ever before.
- Increased my fees to match my expertise and position in the market.
- Had much more fun.

There are countless ways you might find and leverage your target market, but I hope this personal case study helps you see your possibilities more clearly and moves you more quickly from unknown generalist to well-known expert. Take your own leap of focus, and you just might find you enjoy going over the cliff as much as I did.

Tom Davidson is a forester and leadership expert. He is past president of NSA Virginia and co-founder of the Richmond Chapter of the International Coach Federation. Davidson holds BS degrees in forestry and agricultural economics, and an MBA and MS in organization development. He is author of The 8 Greatest Mistakes New Managers Make. He can be reached at Tom@LeadershipNature.com.

A Third-Person Perspective

David Newman, a marketing expert who works with speakers, authors and solo professionals, offers the following takeaways from his work with Tom Davidson.

Go with what you know.

Tom targeted an industry in which his expertise and experience provided him with the right names to drop and the best stories to tell. Credibility oozes into each of his conversations and buyers sense that Tom is the real deal—because he is!

Diversify while still specializing.

Tom built a wide variety of investable opportunities into his thought leadership platform. Each of his delivery vehicles (training, keynotes, assessments, tune-ups) centers on a prospect problem; they are not merely a random collection of services.

Brand your mojo.

Everything Tom does with his branding and naming has a purpose. His wood-veneer business cards, the name of his firm, the *Spot Fires* Blog, the *RangeFinder* assessment—each of these parts makes the whole stronger and more cohesive. It's not a gimmick. It works.

Focus on the ecosystem.

No, this isn't a nature pun. The marketing ecosystem is the larger world of buyers and opportunities that operate around your target market. Tom's ecosystem includes natural resource professionals, vendors, suppliers, government agencies, associations, conferences, and the commercial companies that sell into or depend on them. You'll usually find your laser-focused niche is actually huge, once you map it out.



David Newman is past president of NSA Philadelphia and author of the book DO IT! Marketing (AMACOM, 2013).

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