WRITING A VISION STATEMENT

Everything you need to create the perfect vision statement for your organization.

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WHY YOU NEED A VISION STATEMENT

Your vision statement is the anchor point of your strategic plan. It’s the thing that all of your focus, goals, projects and initiatives should ultimately be helping you to achieve. It sits at the pinnacle of your strategy, and every single person in your organization should know it by heart.

A well crafted vision statement will bring a host of benefits to the organization, including:

- **Focus and alignment**
  Your vision statement will help shine light on hard decisions and prioritization of resources.

- **Inspiration**
  For existing employees and future ones who consider joining your organization.
WHY YOU NEED A VISION STATEMENT

• **Clarity**
  A succinct way of describing what you to and helping third parties such as the media, investors or customers understand what you’re all about.

• **Strategic direction**
  A well created vision statement can be the catalyst for moving your organization towards being the strategic powerhouse you’ve always wanted it to be.

Writing a vision statement is probably the single most important aspect of the entire strategic planning process - as it informs every step to come.
You might notice that our strategy house doesn’t include a spot for a mission statement. There's a reason for this, which we’ll cover in a moment, but first we need to understand the difference between a vision statement and a mission statement.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

A vision statement is a description of your optimal future state. It describes what you want to achieve as an organization.

A mission statement is a description of how you will get to your vision statement. It describes what you do today.

Vision statements often start with words such as ‘To be the...’ whilst mission statements often start with words such as ‘We are...’

Here’s an example of a great vision and mission from the Alzheimer’s Association:

**Our Vision:**
*A world without Alzheimer’s disease.*

**Our Mission:**
*To research the elimination of Alzheimer’s disease whilst providing and enhancing care for those affected today.*

This is a great example of the difference between a vision (the what) and a mission (the how).

DO YOU NEED BOTH?

The answer to this is that ‘it depends’. We’ve worked with hundreds of organizations helping them to develop vision and mission statements, and one of the most common questions that people ask is “what's the difference?”.

The problem here is that you want your strategic plan to be easy to understand and distraction-free. So the risk of having both a vision and a mission is that people can get side-tracked into trying to figure out the difference, and lose sight of the main messages that you’re trying to
VISION VS MISSION

convey in your plan.

The compromise that we’ve come up with is to tweak the ‘traditional’ definition of a vision / mission statement to help organizations come up with one single statement that covers both of these elements.

Specifically, the vision statements that we find to be most effective amongst our clients, are those which include elements of both ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’. They include things that the organization already does well, and blend them with outcomes that they want to achieve in the future.

If you want to see exactly what we mean - skip ahead to ‘Step 5’ of our process below and take a look at what our final product looks like for an imaginary bakery company that we’ve created to help illustrate the process of creating a vision.
THE RULES OF A GREAT VISION STATEMENT

All the best vision statements in the world follow a set of common rules. These rules will help you to avoid the traps involved in writing your own:

1. It should be short – two sentences at an absolute maximum. It’s fine to expand on your vision statement with more detail, but you need a version that is punchy and easily memorable.

2. It needs to be specific to your business and describe a unique outcome that only you can provide. Generic vision statements that could apply to any organization won’t cut it (see our examples later on for more on this point).

3. Do not use words that are open to interpretation. For example, saying you will ‘maximize shareholder return’ doesn’t actually mean anything unless you specify what it actually looks like.

4. Keep it simple enough for people both inside and outside your organization to understand. No technical jargon, no metaphors and no business buzz-words if at all possible!

5. It should be ambitious enough to be exciting but not too ambitious that it seems unachievable. It’s not really a matter of time-framing your vision, because that will vary by organization, but certainly anything that has a time-frame outside of 3 to 10 years should be challenged as to whether it’s appropriate.

6. It needs to align to the values that you want your people to exhibit as they perform their work. You’ll probably create your values later on in the strategic planning process, so be sure to revisit your vision statement when you do.
THE RULES OF A GREAT VISION STATEMENT

Here are a few examples of great vision statements that follow these rules to a tee:

Amazon.com
“To be the world’s most customer centric company.”

Nike
“To bring inspiration and innovation to every single athlete in the world.”

The Scooter Store
“To provide freedom and independence to those with limited mobility.”

Wikipedia
“To help create a world where every single person has free access to the sum of all human knowledge.”

Toys R Us
“To put joy in the hearts of children and smiles on the faces of parents.”

San Diego Zoo
“To be the world’s leader in connecting people to wildlife and conservation.”

DataXu
“To be remembered as the company that brought science to the art of marketing.”

Harley Davidson
“To fulfill dreams through the experience of motorcycling.”

Tesla
“To accelerate the advent of sustainable transport by bringing mass market electric cars to the market as soon as possible.”

UPS
“To be the enabler of global e-commerce.”

If you like these examples and want to see more, check out the Further Reading chapter!
WHEN VISION STATEMENTS GO WRONG

To understand what it is to write a good vision statement, it helps to analyze a few vision statements that got lost somewhere along the way.

We’ve picked out a few (anonymous) vision statements from real-life that don’t make the cut and for each, tried to explain why not:

Exhibit A

“Our company vision is to make every brand more inspiring and the world more intelligent.”

Whilst certainly ‘ambitious’ - one would have to question whether it is realistic that ‘every brand’ in the world will use the services of this company.

Let’s analyze the phrase ‘making the world more intelligent.’ – in truth, it’s very hard to quantify what that might actually look like. That makes this a poor choice for inclusion in the vision statement as if something cannot be quantified it makes it hard to actually strive for in a meaningful way.

The strongest part of this vision statement is the concept of ‘making brands more inspiring’ - which is something specific and meaningful that the organization can realistically hope to achieve.

Exhibit B

“Provide maximum value for our shareholders whilst helping our customers to fulfill their dreams.”

This vision statement could apply to almost any company, anywhere (it’s an insurance company in this case – but would you have guessed that?).

It’s similar to saying ‘Our vision is to succeed as a business’. Whilst not wrong – there is nothing unique or inspiring about this statement.
WHEN VISION STATEMENTS GO WRONG

Exhibit C

“We are committed to achieving new standards of excellence by providing superior human capital management services and maximizing the potential of all stakeholders – clients, candidates and employees – through the delivery of the most reliable, responsive...[the vision statement continues for around 100 more words]...”

It would be quite hard to write a vision statement filled with less tangibility and more subjectivity than this one.


There are simply far too many buzz words, intangibles and vague meanings here for this to be either memorable or inspiring.

WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THESE VISION STATEMENTS?

The vision statements above aren’t from random organizations who made half-hearted efforts. They’re from large multinationals who likely invested significant time and resources into creating them.

Some of the most common pitfalls that organizations hit when working on their vision statements are:

• **Decision by committee**
  Vision statements are by their very nature highly subjective and even personal. Having a committee of people agreeing on the vision statement can easily cause it to be diluted and lose its original purpose. It’s important that the key players in the organization agree on the bulk of the vision statement, but you have to ensure that the process doesn’t result in the vision falling down along the way.

• **Too much involvement from third-parties**
  People often hire outside consultants to help them create their vision statements. Whilst there’s nothing wrong with asking for help, the role of the consultant should be to guide you with a framework and probing questions, rather than giving you any actual answers. Vision
WHEN VISION STATEMENTS GO WRONG

statements need to come from the hearts and minds of the founders / CEOs and senior leaders.

• **Mixing marketing outcomes into your vision statement**
  People often get caught up trying to create vision statements that will look great on the ‘About Us’ section of their websites. This is a mistake, as it draws you away from your true intentions as an organization and creates a disconnect between your public persona and your strategic goals. It would be better in this case to have two vision statements - one for marketing purposes and one internally - though even this is less than ideal.

• **Unwillingness to pivot**
  Once you’ve created your vision statement, it’s important to stand by it in nearly everything you do. But that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t revisit it at least once per year to ensure that it’s still accurate and effective at pushing your organization forward. Some organizations actually achieve their vision statement faster than they thought they would. Others simply find themselves pivoting as an organization into new markets and directions. Either way, you need to check your vision statement often and not be afraid to rewrite it if necessary.

Writing a vision statement is hard and you might not get it 100% right the first time around. Keep coming back to this article to check that your current draft is still in good shape as you go through the process.
STEP #1: DEFINE WHAT YOU ACTUALLY DO

We’ve spent a fair amount of time looking at what to do, and what not to do - now it’s time to move on to giving you a tangible 5 step process to create your own vision statement.

There are literally hundreds of guides out there that will give you examples of good and bad vision statements as well as a high-level overview of what to consider when creating your own. But what we noticed was lacking was a concrete process to actually follow.

This is the exact process that we help our clients go through when they use Cascade.

There are plenty of great vision statements out there that will not conform to the process below – but if you’re struggling or just need a place to start, then hopefully this will help.

Start by being exceptionally clear about what it is your organization actually does. Be careful to remain ‘output focused’ rather than ‘input focused’.

For example, take a look at this famous vision statement:

Microsoft:
“To put a Microsoft powered computer on every desk in the world”.

Strictly speaking what Microsoft ‘do’ is make computer software, but for the purposes of their vision, they looked forward to the actual outcome of this process – i.e. computers on desks, being used.

Let’s look at some other hypothetical examples:

A bakery makes bread. But the outcome is consumers enjoying that bread.

A consulting company gives advice. But the outcome is the success of others based on that advice.

A government department does...lots of things. But the outcome is better lives for the citizens they serve.

When you define what you do as an outcome, you start to transform your product or service into
STEP #1: DEFINE WHAT YOU ACTUALLY DO

a benefit. Vision statements that talk about benefits are far more inspiring than those which talk about the products themselves.

Whilst this process may seem obvious – you would be surprised by how rarely organizations actually do this in a formal, written way.

Doing so will take you a long way towards creating your vision statement – BUT it’s not enough alone! If it was, all bakeries would have the same vision statement – which is hardly inspiring.

So our vision statement at the moment will probably look something like this:

“To make bread that our customers love.”

A good start, but not enough.
STEP #2: DEFINE YOUR UNIQUE TWIST

Very few products or services these days are truly new – most are more like reinventions of something that exists already, but with a different approach, focus or spin.

At some point in your organization’s lifespan – someone will have believed that the reason that THIS organization would be successful where others have failed, was because of………something.

You need to define that something!

Let’s take our bakery example. So far, our vision statement is looking pretty generic, along the lines of customers enjoying our bread.

But why will they enjoy our bread MORE than the bread from the place next door?

Is it because we use centuries old traditions passed through generations of our family?

Because we only use premium grade locally sourced ingredients?

In the same way that in marketing you need a USP (unique selling point) - your vision statement needs the same. This is a key ingredient in helping you to bring the focus and inspiration to your vision statement.

When you add the unique twist, our vision statement might change to something like:

“To make bread that our customers will love, using only the finest locally sourced ingredients.”

Getting better - but we still have 3 more steps to go!
STEP #3: APPLY SOME QUANTIFICATION

A common problem with vision statements is ironically, that they are too visionary!

With no possible end in sight (or a totally unrealistic one) – the initial inspiration derived from a great vision statement can quickly turn to frustration, or even cynicism from employees and customers.

It’s not about applying actual metrics in your vision (don’t say that you want to be a $10,000,000 company for example) - but rather giving yourself a goal that you can step back and assess your progress against.

A big factor here is going to be your ambition. This is the perfect point to ask yourself ‘how big do I actually want to be?’ Maybe you want to be the biggest company in the world, or maybe you just want to run a profitable local business that gives great service to its customers and its staff.

Let’s assume for our bakery that we want the latter - a profitable local business - we might want to refine our target audience to ‘every customer who walks through the door’. Or maybe we want to go a bit broader: ‘every customer within walking distance of the store’.

The quantification we apply could also be industry or vertical specific. If you’re a B2B organization – are you shooting for SMEs or multinational customers?

Let’s take a look at how our bakery vision statement looks now:

“To make bread that the neighborhood loves, using only the finest locally sourced ingredients.”
STEP #4: ADD A RELATABLE HUMAN ASPECT

This is probably the most fun part of creating your vision.

By now, you're getting pretty close to being finished. But one final trick you can apply to help make your vision statement truly memorable is to add a real-life human aspect to it.

Something that makes people conjure a specific mental image when they read your vision statement.

Something that makes them ‘feel’ the meaning of the words.

Let’s look at an example. Which of the following statements is likely to be more memorable:

Option A:
To have every working person in the world using Microsoft products.

or...

Option B:
A Microsoft powered computer on every desk.

B is more memorable, because as you read it, you actually start to visualize a computer sitting on a desk in a room. You probably visualize a room that you actually know in the real world. All of a sudden, you’ve made a connection between Microsoft’s vision statement and your own world.

There’s nothing wrong with A but it’s highly conceptual and thus difficult to transform into a mental picture. Let’s look at another example that we could integrate into our bakery’s vision statement:

Ensure that every customer who leaves our store, does so **smiling**.

Here, using the word ‘smiling’ as apposed to ‘happy’ is powerful, because it conjures a mental image of a person smiling.

It won’t always be possible to bring this level of tangibility to your vision statement – but do it if you can. It will transform your vision from words on a page, to an image in people’s minds.
STEP #5: BRING IT ALL TOGETHER

Now that you’ve got all the components that you need for your vision statement, it’s time to bring them together into the final product.

Here’s what our completed vision statement could look like for the bakery, based on steps 1 to 4:

Our Vision:
“Producing and selling locally sourced cakes and pies that are so delicious and satisfying, that every customer who leaves our store does so with a smile.”

If we deconstruct this into the various steps, we can see each at work as follows:

Producing and selling locally sourced cakes and pies that are so delicious and satisfying, that every customer who leaves our store does so with a smile.

Step 1 – The output
Step 2 – The twist
Step 3 – The quantification
Step 4 – The human connection

You’ll notice that the final product actually combines many of the elements of both a vision statement and a mission statement. We think that’s just fine, so long as it also ticks the boxes of what a good vision statement should be (inspiring, memorable and forward looking).
THE CASE FOR MULTIPLE VISION STATEMENTS

Smaller organizations might want to skip this chapter - but we wanted to address one of the most common questions we get from some of our larger clients:

Is it ok to have more than one vision statement in my organization?

There are a few cases where this can occur - notably if you have a conglomerate situation where you have a holding company with multiple sub-companies, each specializing in a different industry.

A classic example would be someone like Virgin - how can they possibly have just one vision statement that covers their airlines, their music shops and their cola company?!

In these cases, it’s fine to think about having multiple vision statements across the organization, especially if the entities are managed separately and have very different brands and cultures.

What we would suggest here, is to write the corporate vision statement with a focus towards shareholders, customers and staff. And write the individual company vision statements with a focus more towards the products and markets they operate in.

For example, you could write a corporate vision statement such as:

“To deliver rapid growth in all markets which we operate, and to be famous for the high degree of collaboration between our diverse business interests.”

It’s not as inspiring as a product focused vision, but in reality, most people won’t actually be directly contributing to it anyway. Rather they’ll be located in one of the sub companies, each of whom will have its own vision statement which is much more specific and tailored to the market.

Here’s the actual vision statement of the Virgin Group:

“To make a credible contribution towards sustainable lifestyles whilst meeting or exceeding the expectations of our staff, customers and other stakeholders.”

They’ve done a pretty decent job of keeping it broad enough to apply to their 60+ companies, whilst still bringing their own twist to the table with reference to ‘sustainable lifestyles’.
FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

If you enjoyed this article, you might want to check out some of the other guides and posts that we’ve created to help you create the perfect vision statement:

**eBook: 100 of the World’s Greatest Vision Statements**

*A detailed guide, broken down by industry to some of the best vision statements we've ever seen.* [Find out more.](#)

**eBook: Strategic Planning 101**

*A full guide to creating your strategic plan, from vision to values, focus areas and organizational goals.* [Find out more.](#)

**Toolkit: Creating a Vision Statement**

*A download-able Excel template for creating your vision statement step-by-step. Perfect for use in workshops.* [Find out more.](#)

**Software: Cascade Strategy**

*Our very own strategic planning platform, which includes an interactive strategy planning tool complete with a vision statement builder.* [Find out more.](#)

**Blog: Strategy for Everyone**

*Weekly posts about strategic planning, implementation and execution.* [Find out more.](#)
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