

# Selling With The Vision In Mind

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*Some time ago, a colleague introduced me as Mike "Burning Bridges" Thomas. I'd earned the name.*

Early in my career, working for a globally known learning and adventure company in the UK, I wrote a letter to the CEO and managing director. In it, I compared the organisation to a street walker — not in anger, but in observation. Whatever banner was held up — premium, transformational, life-changing — the reality was simpler: whoever waved money got the service. The gap between the vision being sold and the experience being delivered had become, in my view, impossible to ignore.

The letter landed badly. There were repercussions that echoed for longer than I'd like to admit.

But I wasn't wrong.

## The Vision Has to Travel

Every organisation worth joining has a vision. Something that answers the question: why does this exist? For a learning and adventure company, that vision might be something like building resilience, connecting people to themselves and each other, or developing the next generation of leaders. Lofty. Meaningful. Worth getting out of bed for.

The problem is that vision rarely travels cleanly from the person who holds it to the person in front of the client.

Think of it like a game of Telephone. The founder articulates something clear and felt. It passes to the senior leadership team, who translate it into strategy. Strategy becomes a sales deck. The sales deck becomes talking points. The talking points become what someone says on a call with a school coordinator who's trying to book an outdoor programme for 60 students in March.

By the time it arrives, what was once a living idea has become a set of phrases. Buzzwords. Things said by rote.

The client hears *experiential education* or *emotional intelligence* and nods — not because they understand it, but because it sounded credible. The salesperson moves on. The booking is made. And now the delivery team has to make good on a promise that was never properly explained.

## Passion Is Not Optional

This is where most organisations make the mistake of treating sales and delivery as separate functions with separate skill sets. One talks, one does. One wins the client, one keeps them.

But if the person communicating the vision doesn't deeply understand it — not just the language, but the *substance* of it — they cannot communicate it effectively. And more importantly, they cannot communicate it with conviction.

Belief is contagious. So is the absence of it.

If a salesperson is presenting experiential education as one of many products, something that does what it says on the tin, the client will sense it. Not because they know the field, but because people can feel the difference between someone who believes in what they're offering and someone who's reading from a script.

The vision has to be something the person selling it would defend in an argument. Something they'd talk about at dinner. Something they'd lose the deal over rather than misrepresent. If it isn't — if it's just a banner — then what's being sold is the banner, not what's underneath it.

## The Restaurant Problem

Here's where the gap between vision and delivery becomes genuinely dangerous: when the promise is made without any honest accounting of what it would take to keep it.

Imagine a restaurant that seats 180 people. They take a booking for 200, with half of those guests carrying dietary restrictions that range from coeliac to vegan to G6PD deficiency to a handful of individual allergies the chef hasn't encountered before. It's possible, technically. But it requires time to prepare, staff to train, additional hands in the kitchen, and money to cover all of it.

If none of that investment is made, the evening will be subpar at best. At worst, something will go wrong.

Outdoor and adventure learning providers face exactly this problem. A school arrives with 30 students. Half are strong, confident, experienced. Four are average. Four are neurodiverse — each in different ways, with different needs, different triggers, different responses to challenge. The provider nods and delivers the same programme they always deliver, perhaps with the smallest of tweaks.

The students who needed something different don't get it. The school is disappointed. The staff, having done their best within a system that didn't equip them, walk away a little more disillusioned than they were before.

Bespoke is only easy when you invest in it. The staff, the training, the time, the money. And it is exponentially easier when the vision driving it is simple enough to be genuinely flexible — rather than a complex set of corporate and client objectives fighting each other for priority in a 90-minute session.

## Keep It Simple Enough to Mean Something

This is what I've come to believe, having been on every side of this: the organisations that consistently deliver on their vision are the ones whose vision is simple enough to survive the journey.

Outside-In's is this: *Working Towards A Connected World*.

That's it. Connection — to yourself, to the people around you, to the world you inhabit. John Muir put it more eloquently than I ever will: "*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.*" But the idea is the same. Everything is connected. Our work is to help people feel that, understand it, and act from it.

That vision fits in a sentence. It can be explained in thirty seconds. It can be felt in a well-run session. And it can be handed to any member of the team — the director, the programme coordinator, the person making the first call to a new client — without losing its meaning on the way.

A complicated vision doesn't survive the Telephone game. A simple one might.

## What This Means in Practice

For directors and founders, the question isn't just *do we have a vision?* It's: can the person representing us to clients actually articulate it — with understanding, not just words?

For the people doing that representing, the question is harder and more personal: *do I believe this? Could I explain what we do to a sceptic and mean it?* If the answer is no, that's worth sitting with. Not because the job isn't worth doing, but because the gap between what's being said and what's being meant is exactly where trust erodes — for the client, for the team, and eventually for the person saying it.

I sent that letter in my youth, driven by something that felt like idealism at the time and feels more like professional integrity now. It cost me something. But the conviction behind it is the same conviction that eventually led me to build something where the banner and the reality are the same thing.

That's the standard worth holding. Not for the sake of a mission statement — but because the people on the receiving end of your programmes deserve to receive what was promised to them.

## Practical Takeaways

- Audit the chain.** Trace your vision from the person who holds it to the person who communicates it externally. At what point does it start to dilute? That's where to invest.
- Hire for belief, train for skill.** Someone who understands and cares about what you do will communicate it more effectively than someone who's learned the language without the substance.
- Make your vision travel-ready.** If it takes a paragraph to explain, it will arrive as a sentence — and probably not the right one. Distil it until a new team member could say it on their first week and mean it.
- Be honest about capacity.** Winning the client matters less than keeping them. If delivering what you've promised requires investment — in staffing, training, adaptation — make that case internally before you make the promise externally.
- Close the gap.** The distance between what you say you do and what you actually deliver is where reputation lives. Keep it as small as possible.

*The vision doesn't sell itself. But if the person selling it believes it — really believes it — it doesn't have to.*

### Mike Thomas

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