

1.4: Let's Meet the Potential Client

learning objective

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. Discuss the background and primary employees (characters) of msnbc.com, a well-known media brand in search of its identity.

Established in 1996 as a joint venture between Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), ten years later msnbc.com finds itself in an increasingly crowded field of news providers and hopes to add new users to its twenty-five million unique visitors a month. As msnbc.com's VP of marketing, Catherine Captain, says, "I am particularly concerned about distinguishing ourselves in a market where every new site is starting to look a lot alike."

It is important to understand that the client is msnbc.com the Web site and *not* MSNBC the cable channel. Although the Web site msnbc.com and the cable channel MSNBC were launched together in 1996, they have always maintained separate corporate structures and news operations. NBC and Microsoft remain fifty-fifty partners in msnbc.com, but Microsoft has reduced its stake in the television network to 18 percent. And msnbc.com is editorially and financially separate from MSN, the portal site and online service operated by Microsoft, although it acts as that site's primary news provider.

In addition to original content from its staff, which is based out of the newsroom in Redmond, Washington, msnbc.com is the news Web site for the NBC News family. It also features content from the cable television news channel MSNBC, NBC shows such as *Today*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *Dateline NBC*, and partners such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. In addition, msnbc.com made its first acquisition in late 2007 when it bought Newsvine, a Web site with community-driven news stories and opinions.

In its history as a company, msnbc.com never pursued or launched a branding campaign until Ms. Captain arrived just shy of the site's tenth anniversary. In her quest for the right agency, Ms. Captain sent RFPs "to a whole slew of potential agencies."

SS+K's Pitch to Win the msnbc.com Account

Objective: Win the msnbc.com account!

I knew that SS+K was the perfect agency for her, because we come from the same philosophy.

Danielle Tracy, SS+K vice president

Video Spotlight

Michelle Rowley and Russell Stevens

[\(click to see video\)](#)

Russell describes the response from the SS+K perspective and how they approached the RFP from msnbc.com.

Victory! SS+K Lands the msnbc.com Account

You can guess the outcome: Catherine Captain chose SS+K to reintroduce msnbc.com to the world. Her goal was to maximize the impact of her modest \$7 million marketing budget. Instead of choosing an interactive agency, which she said would "predetermine her plan," Captain preferred the "media-agnostic" approach of SS+K. And so, in March of 2006, a decade-old msnbc.com announced it would soon launch its first branding campaign.

The idea of integrated marketing communications has been around for a long time. But the independently held SS+K embraced the concept in a way that only people from a disparate number of camps could: there are no well-populated traditional territories in the agency. Instead, it is home for a multidisciplinary cast of communication experts as well as a collection of "formers"—former actors, scientists, journalists—galvanized by a combined passion for strategic innovation and, as Captain observes, challenging the status quo. There is no allegiance to method or medium; advertising doesn't get preferential treatment over public relations or other buzz boosters.

Video Spotlight

Catherine Captain

[\(click to see video\)](#)

Catherine describes what made SS+K the right fit, and the importance of understanding the consumer.

key takeaway

SS+K's team developed its pitch by doing its homework about the types of people who visit Web sites to get their information. The agency also wasn't afraid to think creatively about using a variety of media to capture their interest. As a result of this effort the agency won the msnbc.com account. Now the work *really* starts.

exercise

- What were the key contributing factors that allowed SS+K to win the msnbc.com account? Be sure to comment on the roles played by Joe Kessler, Danielle Tracy, and Catherine Captain.

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