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Focus on Marketing Strategy, Not Just Tactics

by Kenneth G. Lauerer and William R. Markin

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Far too often, agencies and companies alike unwittingly focus on tactics, rather than strategy, in their marketing and communications activities.

We see it often, as companies are shrinking and combining sales and marketing departments. Merged departments means fewer people with more to do. Often, the same people are involved in management, in direct sales, in product development, in marketing and in communications.

It's not always easy for companies to pause, step back, and review where they are going. However, if you don't have a clear marketing road map, you'll likely be going in circles, wasting time and money, and falling short of business and sales goals.

Understand your brand

Before we look at how you can develop your strategy, we need to understand how that strategy relates to your company's brand. The brand is the primary driver behind your marketing efforts.

The term "branding" is one that is used frequently, and is perhaps almost as frequently misused.

A brand is not a slogan. Perhaps the greatest mistake many advertisers (and advertising agencies) make is to assume that a brand is simply a slogan or tagline.

In doing so, they point to such examples as "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight" and "The ultimate driving machine."

Yet, while a slogan or tag line can sometimes *capture the essence* of a brand, it *cannot create one*. The brand must be understood first. Then, the right tag line or theme can reinforce it. But unless the brand is already understood, a slogan or tag line is meaningless to the audience.

In fact, some of the best-regarded brands, such as Starbucks and Nordstroms, don't even have slogans.

A brand is a unique collection of values that a product or service brings to the marketplace.

If Starbucks just sold coffee at ridiculously high prices, it would have a lot of competition and might not even have survived, let alone prospered. But the unique collection of values that Starbucks brings to the marketplace far exceeds coffee alone, and includes such intangibles as class, sophistication and perhaps even a bit of snob appeal.

A company's brand exists within the mind of its audience.

Building a brand is the process of changing the mindset of audiences so that they view the product or service in terms of the total collection of values—both intangible and tangible—that it brings to them.

Because brand building is a process, it must start inside the minds of audience members, with what they know and don't know, what they believe, and what qualities and values are important to them.

How do you develop a strategy?

As marketing strategists, we recognize that the most difficult and critical part of any assignment frequently occurs long before the creative process even begins. This initial thinking is vital because without it there may be no way to objectively judge whether the creative approach will work.

Effective brand marketing is a combination of the RIGHT message, delivered in the RIGHT way, to achieve the RIGHT results.

To that end, here's a simple but effective formula that you can apply to your own situation. We call it The Delta Formula, from the Greek letter "D," which is the mathematical symbol for change. It is based on three key components:

1. **Figure out what you want to accomplish.** In marketing, this is usually described as the change you want in the marketplace—in buying habits, distribution methodologies, or whatever the strategic goals dictate. To achieve this, it is often necessary to change market perceptions and attitudes. That's where advertising, marketing and public relations come in.
2. **Figure out what you have to do to make what you want to accomplish happen.** It's easy enough to run an ad or produce a brochure and hope something good happens as a result. But unless that ad or brochure is specifically targeted toward bringing about a desired change in the marketplace, results are a hit-or-miss proposition or, at best, only temporary.
3. **Do what you have to do to make what you want to accomplish happen.** Finally, it is necessary to execute the strategy, which requires resources in terms of both time and money, and there is seldom enough of either to do everything well. That's why it's important to be able to prioritize, to apply adequate resources to the most critical tasks to achieve the necessary results. Otherwise, it's easy to get caught in the trap of trying to do so many things that nothing gets done well, and there are no real results to point to, despite significant expenditures and an abundance of effort. Prioritization and the application of resources is a formula that has proven successful for countless clients over the years.

While the steps may be simple, the process is not. It takes an honest look at your company to accurately understand what your current brand means, and how you want to change it. Then, outline a strategy to develop that brand in the minds of your audiences.

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