

Marketing Musings



by Rich Herbst

Marketing "At" versus Engaging "With"

*"I tried direct mail, and it didn't work."
"We did an email blast. But the responses were poor, and we didn't get any
new business from it."*

I hear this fairly often. Someone tries a marketing program and comes away frustrated. Been there?

Why do the failures happen? Sometimes the answer is obvious. Perhaps the message wasn't right. Or the proposition wasn't clear. Sometimes the creative execution was poor, such that the piece was never even looked at. But all too often these efforts were mis-conceptualized in the first place. They were simply aimed in the wrong direction.

Before creating any sort of marketing communication, there needs to be clarity in what you are trying to accomplish. It is important to determine who your targets are and where you are trying to go with them. When faced with the unfortunate failures in these areas—the honest answer may be, "I just want to get my message out and increase sales." Said another way, it's like throwing a message "at" the target and hoping it sticks.

In today's world, marketing "at" is no longer "it". Consumers and businesses are barraged with messages and offers. Successful marketers break through the clutter not because they throw more messages and offers "at" their target. Rather, they succeed because they somehow reach through all the noise and clutter and engage "with" the customer in a more meaningful way.

What marketers need to do is *engage* more powerfully. Our endgame is not just creating a brand impression or image with the customer, but rather a *relationship*. We don't want someone just to know the brand, we want them to engage with the brand. And if we're talking about the business-to-business side of marketing, we want our targets to not only engage with the brand, we want them to engage with us as well.

Engagement has started to become a buzzword in the marketing arena. Often, though, marketers use the term with a focus only on social media tactics such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others. While it's true that these tools can help accomplish engagement, there's much more to it.

Let's go back to our examples above. These unsuccessful email or direct mail programs failed possibly because they were one-off efforts that were not grounded in a sound overall engagement strategy. If they were part of such a larger, better orchestrated program, they

might have shown a more healthy and measurable impact. Rather than being standalone messages randomly flung "at" the target, they might have served as the appropriate and right contact to spur a set of customers into action.

Developing a Sound Engagement Strategy...

Preparing such a strategy takes some time and careful thought. I can share here, though, some basic elements to get started. Let's start with answering some questions about your target audience, "Who is your target, really?" The answer is not some demographic answer such as "women 25-54" or "C-level executives in the manufacturing sector". Be clearer. "Who is this, typically? How do they think? What concerns or needs might they have?"

Let's also think about your brand, "How do you want the target to relate to your brand?" We're not only asking about what the brand stands for, but also how you would like others to relate to your brand. When considering these questions we start to think about the kind of relationship we are seeking to form with the customer.

Relationships form over time and engaging a target is a process that happens in steps or touchpoints. Here we're talking about the different ways that the customer encounters your company, your brand, and your people. Touchpoints can include the advertising, Web, or direct marketing effort where one first hears of your brand. Touchpoints include dialog, word of mouth, and online interaction in a social media setting. Touchpoints often continue with a Web experience. In business-to-business situations, you can bet that your target will at some point check you out via your website. Live dialogs with a salesperson are touchpoints, and continuing communications such as relationship-focused direct mail and email certainly matter.

So the bigger question is, "How does one connect the dots, so to speak, across all these potential touchpoints to engage the target in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way?" Rather than throwing one-off messages "at" the customer, begin to consider an engagement process in which all the touchpoints help move the customer toward a deeper relationship with you and your brand.

Effective marketers today are cutting through the noise and clutter by taking smart steps to form a more meaningful brand relationship, and they understand it to be a process. They engage "with" the customer to draw them ever closer to a deep and productive relationship.

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