

Marketing message must make connection

Consider the following statistics from the classic marketing book "Differentiate or Die," written by Jack Trout and Steve Rivkin. In a very short span of time not long ago, there was an astonishing explosion of choice in consumer products. Examples included:



GUEST COLUMN
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- A 700-percent increase in Frito-Lay chip varieties.
- An 800-percent increase in Colgate toothpastes.
- A 900-percent increase in Pop-Tart flavors.
- An increase from 5 to 285 running-shoe options.

And yet, with all the choices present to consumers and businesses for products and services, why do so many marketers still rely on one-size-fits-all strategies and tactics?

All too often, stagnant organizations are using the "build it, and they will come" philosophy. Enamored with product design, technology or their own perceived benefits, they don't put the proper effort into building awareness, cultivating acceptance and creating demand in their intended target markets. Just like the decrease of effectiveness of antibiotics due to overexposure, so too are potential buyers of all kinds immune to traditional, over-used, mass-marketing approaches.

The end result often is a sales force "taking the heat" for not achieving sales and revenue goals. But in many cases, it is the misguided marketing programs that are to blame.

The service we hope to receive when we are the customer is the same your customer wants to receive when buying from you – personal. From the deli guy behind the counter at the local market to the real-estate agent helping you buy a new house, we want the people who serve us to know our preferences intimately. The recent "Who knows you better than Dunkin' Donuts?" campaign is an excellent example of marketing trying to help increase sales by suggesting "getting personal."

Though not limited to print, the current explosion of variable-demand print (VDP) technologies shows how the power of personalization can positively impact marketing and sales success. Described in the book "The One to One Future," by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, the ability to identify and interact with potential customers by understanding their unique desires and customizing your marketing message to them individually is now not only a reality but a necessity.

Personalization implies being able to build a relationship with your customers – one at a time. Consider these three factors as benchmarks in successful personalized marketing programs.

■ **Nurture.** One of the common mistakes organizations make is to act as if there is a silver bullet in the marketing effort, that one ad, direct mail piece or billboard is all that is needed to get results. But in our personal relationships,

one event does not define them. Rather, it is an on-going series of interactions and remembrances that keep us connected to other individuals.

In the same way, you must commit to a never-ending series of communication tactics like newsletters, e-mails, white papers, direct mail campaigns, etc. to interest, excite and acquire new customers and keep them for the long haul.

■ **Relevancy.** Many of us like to think we can hold a conversation with just about anyone about just about anything. And while mixing well at cocktail parties and networking events is a critical business skill, the individuals we strike up business (and personal) relationships with that pass the test of time are going to be those that we have the most in common with.

Personalized marketing has the advantage of speaking to the specific needs of each individual potential customer and thus laying the groundwork for common ground. Subsequent market and product segmentation – backed up with targeted, relevant communications – then has the potential to generate higher response rates in your marketing efforts.

■ **Two-way relationships.** Popularized by marketing guru Seth Godin, the concept of permission marketing is a critical part of a personalized relationship-marketing program. Relationships, either personal or business, don't work when they are best characterized as a one-way street. It is the give-and-take, seeing each party as a partner in the other's success over a period a time that makes them meaningful and profitable.

Unfortunately, too many organizations that do not embrace this way of thinking send out lots of "stuff" in hopes of getting any kind

of business. Sophisticated companies know that the process of building customers requires constant feedback. The lifetime value of the relationship only grows for both parties when it is more personal, more intimate. Rather than a one-way street with a dead end, smart marketers build highways of communication that go in multiple directions.

Conduct focus groups, do research, send surveys. Ask, listen and address customer concerns and suggestions to ensure long-term growth.

In the hit movie "You've Got Mail," the business tycoon Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) responds to Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) regarding her frustration about him putting her small bookshop out of business, "It wasn't personal – it was business."

To which she replies, "But it was personal to me."

The importance of personalization in the attracting, acquiring and retaining of customers will only increase as time goes on. Good marketing today must be personal to be successful. Anything else just may leave you looking like too many of the non-descript products or services that no one notices – and no one buys. ■

Brian Butler is vice president of sales and marketing for Cranston-based The Allied Group.

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