

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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THE 3-STEP COMMENTING PROCESS (RE-VISITED)

If you have ever spent any time working in Sales, you know first-hand that good salespeople are well-trained. The Sales function is definitely one within the company that is committed to ongoing training of its human resources. In fact, it seems that virtually every sales organization you run into adheres to some kind of a selling process—often it's the 7-Step Selling Process. Young sales trainees actually memorize the process and then follow the steps—in sequence—on each sales call. And when their sales managers accompany them on calls, the manager typically reviews how well the trainee did on each step, after the call. Internalizing a disciplined “step-process” like this makes for what experienced Procter & Gamble sales managers used to call a “checked-out” salesperson (as in professionally qualified: they follow the 7-steps like a “checklist” in their minds).

If step-processes like these work so well in getting results (like closing a sale), why doesn't the Marketing function have any? Well, actually, Marketing does have at least one that we know of—the 3-Step Commenting Process. As you can readily imagine, having only three steps would seem to make internalizing this process much easier than those seven steps the salespeople have to get right. And yet, it seems so rare that we run across marketers who are “unconsciously competent” (as in, they follow it so naturally they don't even have to think about it) with the three steps.

The steps themselves are inherently simple, perhaps tracing their roots to the old military method of training: (1) Tell them what you're going to tell them; (2) Tell them; and (3) Tell them what you just told them. Translated to commenting on the work of others these steps become: (1) Provide an overview of the entire work—especially in terms of progress made; (2) Give specific direction as required to guide the work further; and (3) Summarize the direction you've just provided in the form of concrete next steps. Pretty simple, right? Also logical and easy-to-follow. So why is it that instead of laying out our response and comments on creative material that our creative agencies present we get instead undisciplined, almost organic responses, such as...

--*“Let me think out loud for a few minutes.”* You've undoubtedly heard one of the more senior marketers on the team start his or her comments this way. What they are really saying when they propose to think out loud is something like this: “I have no earthly idea what I think of this work overall and therefore I probably don't have any value-added comments to make...but since I'm supposed to be one of the marketing leaders here I need to say something; I'm going to just start the motor in my mind and assume my many experiences will generate something worthwhile.” Of course, this totally disorganized way of responding and sharing thinking makes everyone around the table work extra hard—in the hopes of finding something to hold onto. And talk

about wasting time!

--***“I’m going to take each of your approaches one-by-one.”*** This seems to be a favorite way among many marketing people of organizing a response to an agency. Perhaps it is so well-liked because it is so easy to simply say, “OK, you presented in this order therefore I’ll respond in the same order.” But, have you ever tried staying with a marketing commenter who is marching through, say, three or more of the agency’s ideas? It’s incredibly difficult to maintain attention by about the third idea when someone is commenting on the pros and cons of each one. Not only that, but because some of the ideas are considerably stronger or better bets than the others, a good deal of time is wasted when the commenter expends verbal energy on the weaker ones. It’s always better to talk about the ideas you want the team to keep working on; if they want to understand why you did not speak about a particular idea (one you found less appealing), they’ll ask you afterwards, and you can tell them then.

--***“I’m going to start with a few questions for you.”*** Of course, if someone responding to the agency’s work has legitimate questions to better understand an idea or storyboard, it’s always appropriate to clear those up before actually responding to the work. But what you most often find is that marketers—having no particular disciplined way of responding—will either attempt to hide their issues with the work in a series of “innocuous questions,” or try to buy some organize-my-thinking time by tossing out some delaying questions. Perhaps another way to appreciate the lameness of “thirty questions” is to think of the entire creative development process as one of problem-solving: the marketer-client has an objective for the advertising to address, which the problem-solving agency creative teams take as a “How to solve” question. They have now brought you (the client) some potential answers to that question...before you ask even more questions, what do you think of these potential answers?

--***“Let me react with my gut.”*** A lot of marketers think this is the proper and fair way to give a first response to someone’s creative work. They say it is being honest and giving the creative teams a more personal reaction (as opposed to, say, an intellectual reaction), and this is what the creative teams want to hear most. Maybe some do, but investing significant amounts of a company’s money in advertising that one or two people like in their gut does not seem like a high-odds way of getting a good return. We think a much higher-odds way would be to first assess the creative from a strategic perspective (i.e., how well it delivers against the Creative Brief) and then, if desired, offer up a gut reaction that’s based upon something more tangible. When you get down to it, this is a business accountability all marketers have.

We urge all of our clients to practice using the simple 3-Step Commenting Process—not just when responding to an agency’s presentation, but when responding or needing to provide direction to anyone (especially one’s subordinates). It’s a basic skill that, much like its 7-Step Selling Process sister, can help you get the results you’re looking for: getting people to do what you need them to do!

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

- 1. Think of learning the 3-Step Commenting Process as akin to learning a new language.** When you’re trying to grasp a new language you practice repeating certain useful phrases over and over again. Here are some very useful phrases for the commenting process: Overview--*“By way of an overview, I think...”* or simply, *“As an overview...”* ;

Specific Direction—*“In terms of specific direction, there are several things I’d offer...”* ;
Summary of Next Steps—*“By way of next steps...”* or *“So, the actions I just covered are...”* .

- 2. Another highly useful phrase while providing specific direction** goes something like this: *“What I’d really like to see more of...”* or *“What I think we need to see here is....”*
This “set-up” phrasing works real well in leading you to talk about what you don’t see that you would like to see (as opposed to falling into the trap of talking about what you see that you don’t like).

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