

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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ARE CAMPAIGNS DEAD?

It happened once again last week. While working with a client on communications development, the client asked, “Why do you continue to advocate developing *campaigns*? We don’t really develop campaigns anymore.” Hearing this more and more familiar comment, coupled with the recent news that Leo Burnett had lost the Altoids account (which inevitably means the demise of that 10-year plus campaign), made us think harder about what is happening (or is it “has happened”) to campaigns.

Of course, we are well aware of, and have written about in these *Dispatches*, a number of longstanding advertising campaigns...like the MasterCard “Priceless” and Absolut “Bottle” campaigns. But, more and more it seems, these kinds of long-running single-idea approaches are becoming rarer. Assuming this is a reasonable observation, what might be some of the causes, or at least the factors, that can explain it?

1. A lack of confidence in marketing, in general. Before you even consider the level of “effectiveness confidence” in something like advertising in general, or even an advertising campaign itself, you have to assess just what level of confidence GM’s and marketers have in their marketing efforts altogether. Sometime last year *Advertising Age* published some results from a Marketing Accountability Survey conducted in the U.S. among 130 senior-level marketers. Here are the numbers they presented:

- 60% of respondents say that defining, measuring, and taking action on (marketing effort) ROI is important;
- 20% of these respondents say they are currently satisfied with their ability to do so;
- 73% of the respondents say they lack the confidence in understanding the impact of marketing on sales.

That last number kind of gets your attention, doesn’t it? And you can only imagine that if three-fourths of senior level marketing managers lack this confidence what their General Managers’ confidence level must be. So, if these attitudes are even close to reality, it’s not so hard to understand why those who make the brand investment decisions might be reluctant to pursue a “big ad campaign.”

2. At least some conviction behind the product-news “awareness” need. Actually, those very same clients who tell us they do not do ad campaigns anymore also tell us that they **do** typically advertise behind brand line extensions or important product news. But any advertising they do tend to be of the “one-off” or short-term variety. Advertising behind product news...this

is definitely not something new, but probably is something more and more prevalent now. What is it about product news that can make even the most skeptical GM agree to invest some dollars in communications behind it?

The most obvious answer has to be that most product news generates (at least for the first 3-6 months) new distribution and some apparent incremental volume. And while marketing managers may not be demonstrating the effect of the concurrent product news *advertising* on initial sales, everyone can at least sleep well at night believing that the ads are running while the new item is growing. One can, at the very least, “associate” the advertising with some growth. But there is something even more basic at work when a senior marketer or GM agrees to spend behind product news advertising and communications: common sense says that if you have news, you gotta tell people about it! Perhaps you can include any of these hypotheses about why spend behind news but not behind long-duration campaigns under the simple business management mode of “short-term volume delivery.” Whatever the explanation, one thing is for sure: marketing monies are more and more being earmarked for single-shots than for multiple campaign executions.

3. Poor client appreciation of what a campaign idea really is. It would be easy to conclude our possible explanations for fewer campaigns these days with the factors already mentioned. The truth is, though, there are more likely reasons than prevailing management attitudes about marketing or communications spending. And these more likely factors are the ones marketers themselves can better control. The first is simply better understanding what a campaign idea is. Far too many marketers and client advertisers are under the impression that if you have a “tagline,” for example, you have a campaign. But is “Drivers Wanted” really a campaign? Without any accompanying dramatic visualization to give meaning to the words, there can be no campaign. Even the longstanding Economist outdoor and bus-stop campaign, while using headlines (words!) only, developed an ownable and memorable way of visualizing the Economist attitude.

Nor is a campaign established by merely continually visualizing the “brand colors” or some similar page layout in print. Where’s the idea in this? And yet, we hear all too many marketers saying they think their distinctive look on a magazine page gives them a campaign. Maybe our advertising and communications agencies have to help us better understand and appreciate what a real campaign *sounds* and *looks* like.

4. Poor client direction to the creative agencies. This could actually be the single biggest reason why there are fewer campaigns now. Certainly if client-advertisers cannot truly appreciate the value of a campaign idea, they are not very likely to be able to request or help creative teams craft them. But even among those marketers who **do** understand and appreciate campaigns, there is often the tendency to bury potential campaign ideas early in the development process...under a pile of executional guidelines and “mandatories.” Just last week a client showed us a creative brief that had 8 executional guidelines; if you read them through, what the client was really doing was art-directing the entire “spot.” Clients don’t create campaigns.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

If, after reviewing these possible hypotheses, you and your agency team would like to pursue campaign development (for **any** medium, not merely television advertising), here are a few

suggestions:

1. Get together with the account and creative teams at the agency and spend part of a day looking at and talking about campaigns. Have them show you some from other clients in their shop. Bring along some of your own from other categories. Show and tell. Reach some agreement on what elements make a particular communication part of a campaign as opposed to a one-off.
2. When your creative teams present any communication to you for the very first time, insist that they state the Idea behind the communication approach before they ever show you any clever words or pictures. Maybe as part of this idea-stating they can give you an analogy or even refer to some other brand now or in the past that has done something similar to the idea being presented.
3. Determine to set up some kind of reliable assessment in the marketplace well before the campaign is born and before the investment-meter starts running. It just doesn't make sense to sell management on a campaign approach to brand-building without any accountability system in place to justify it.

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