

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

Sunday, April 10, 2011

ARE YOUR INSIGHTS “TRIPLE A” RATED?

“S&P Cuts Portugal’s Long-Term Credit Ratings”

“Standard and Poor’s ratings Services cut its rating on Portugal two notches closer to junk and kept them on watch for further downgrade...the ratings agency lowered its long-term sovereign debt to ‘BBB’ from ‘A-’.” (Wall Street Journal, March 24, 2011)

As the global financial crisis that began in late 2008 continues, it seems that we have evolved from seeing companies—especially financial institutions—to seeing entire countries “on the brink” of collapse. Quite honestly, perhaps like many of you, until recent times we paid little attention to things like the Standard & Poor’s or Moody’s financial ratings—of companies or countries. But independent ratings systems like these (of a company’s or a country’s credit-worthiness) have been around and carefully watched by would-be investors for a long time. And, with the severity of the world’s crisis, it is not surprising that some financial experts are now calling for a total re-vamp, not only of *who* but also *how* credit ratings should be better ascertained going forward.

In case you haven’t looked closely at the range of some typical, current financial ratings, here are just a few definitions from Moody’s:

Aaa Rating—judged to be of the highest quality, with minimal credit risk;

Baa Rating—medium grade and possesses certain speculative risks;

Caa Rating—poor standing and high credit risk.

Obviously, the “gold standard” rating that is most desirable—for both availability and amount of credit—is the “triple A” rating. Who wouldn’t want to have and maintain a “triple A” rating? After all, such a rating allows for the absolute highest confidence among investors.

Maybe at this point you’re wondering, “I thought *Dispatches* was supposed to be about developments from the *marketing* front, not from the financial front.” It is. But we think there is something important that we marketing leaders can learn from developments in the S&P or Moody’s financial ratings system—particularly when it comes to how we determine and “rate” the insights we come up with for our brand communications.

Maybe you’ve never considered “rating” insights. But take another look at the introductory quote from the Wall Street Journal, especially the part that refers to lowering Portugal’s rating

close to “junk.” And then, think again about how critically important good insights are toward delivering on the big investments that marketers and their management make on brand communications. If you do these two things, you may well end up concluding what we have: namely, most of what we marketers call insights in our Creative or Communication Briefs are actually closer to junk; and very few, therefore, are likely to ensure a good return on the communications investments that will ultimately be made. Take, for example, the following insight that one of our clients recently proposed for a brief:

“As a mom, I want to do the very best for my kids. That means that I must ensure they get the proper nutrition to help them grow and do well in school. After all, I want them to have a better future than me.”

In our view, this is classic junk—worthy of an insight rating of about “Ccc.” In the first place, it is hardly an *insight*; at best, it would qualify as what most marketers call an Accepted Consumer Belief. Perhaps, fifty years or so ago, something like this when heard and understood for the very first time, might have qualified as an insight. But, if we’re honest, this same thought has been re-worded, recycled, and regurgitated so many times as to become tiresome. You have to ask yourself, “Really, is this the best we can come up with when we’re preparing to spend millions and we’re intending to actually give creative teams something compelling to work with?”

Here’s another one we’ve seen:

“Quitting smoking is really hard. It takes so much willpower, and even then you may not succeed. I really need an easier way to quit—come on, give me some help here, please!”

This one might qualify as something even lower than junk (“Ccc-?”). After all, it is nothing more than a bald-faced statement of *need*. Nothing wrong with clearly understanding consumer or customer needs. But let’s not lift these mile-wide & inch-deep expressions of need from a need-states study or a focus group transcript and slap them into the brief as an insight. Who are we kidding? There’s no in-depth understanding in such a statement of the attitudes, feelings, and genuine apprehensions *behind* the need. If we knew those, we might have a legitimate insight.

How about one more recent example:

“When it comes to toilet paper, my family demands a quality product. But, really, there is any number of good quality toilet papers on the market. Choosing one is as good as choosing another. What’s the difference?”

Sound familiar? It ought to because this framework expression of “all products in (fill in the category) seem the same to me” has been dubbed an insight in hundreds, maybe thousands, of briefs. Probably one of the reasons for its popularity is that it automatically “sets up” (for the Brand Manager anyway) that one new feature or benefit that will, when revealed in the brand’s communications, explain the missing difference. The only trouble with it is that, junk like this gives creative teams virtually nothing new in terms of consumer attitudes or perspectives to work with as they seek relevant and refreshing ways to connect with the dubious consumer. If for no other reason than this, it should probably get an insight rating of “Ddd.”

As you may have already concluded, it's pretty easy for us to call out pseudo or non-insights—so many get used so often that they readily come to mind. We know them almost by heart. The harder thing is to call out real, as in legitimate and potentially productive, insights: those few but jarring (even dazzling) consumer or customer words or expressions that, when first heard or seen, cause nearly everyone on the brand and creative agency teams to respond with, “What was that?” or “Talk about changing the conversation!” We know how hard it is to discover and then express powerful insights. Our intent in calling out these non-insights and in giving them “junk ratings” is simply to suggest that we can all do a much better job in both areas. More than anything else, perhaps like the financial ratings systems of the future, we will all commit to a more *honest appraisal* of what constitutes something worthy of a big investment.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

If, like us, you grow tired of seeing the same, lame expressions of a consumer or customer insight, here are a few suggestions to shake things up:

1. With your communications agencies, establish an Insight Rating System. Use whatever rating labels you want, but be sure to identify and specifically articulate the criteria required to earn a given rating. Include an insight example for each rating level. And be sure to define what actions are to be taken for any insights that fall below the highest rating level.
2. When determining the criteria for a given insight rating level, consider *weighting* the criteria on the basis of relative importance. For example, one might argue that the single most important criterion for any potential insight is the “horsepower” it has toward generating a wide range of communication ideas. Such a criterion might therefore warrant a weighting factor of 3X.
3. Whatever the rating system, make this commitment above all: the ultimate rating of potential insights will be done by the *agency creative teams*, not the client team. The single biggest thing that insights bring to the Creative (or Communication) Briefs is this: to provide angles and options for creative ideas that will connect with the consumer or customer. When it comes to placing communication investment bets, the creative teams are the ones whose independent rating we want.

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