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Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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CLIMBING YOUR WAY TO BRAND SUCCESS

We like to use metaphors when teaching brand building concepts and principles to marketing managers. As you know a “metaphor” is using one thing to represent another (among other meanings of the term). We like and choose to use metaphors because they serve to dramatize and help make the concepts and principles clearer and more memorable. Additionally, they enable us to suspend fixed notions of subjects and embrace them with “beginner’s mind” so that we may see and create new, more creative, possibilities.

This week we are going to use wall, rock and mountain climbing as a metaphor for customer selection, acquisition and retention in creating brand loyalty. This struck us as a good metaphor following a two-hour session of wall climbing at the Evanston Athletic Club. The club has a wall that rises 50-feet from its base. My wife, June, introduced us to the activity and served as an inspiration to me. Following some brief instruction from a qualified climber and trainer, Evan, we hooked-up to our harnesses attached them to our ropes and began a meticulous climb to the top.

Like everything in life it was anything but uneventful if one pauses to reflect on the experience and its meanings. We faced challenges on our climb to scale to the top of the wall that brought us face to face with temporary setbacks leading to changes in strategies and execution to ultimately iterate our way to success. It reminded us a lot of what it takes in achieving success with brand building. In particular it got us to thinking about customer selection, acquisition and retention. Here’s what we learned:

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. ***Strategically segment the market*** – Before climbing you want to consider alternate approaches to the top. Certainly some routes are likely to be easier than others affording the climber with a better likelihood for a successful ascent to the top. In customer selection one needs to carefully consider with whom your brand can best establish a successful relationship. This is going to be driven by a number of important factors such as: what segments exist in the marketplace; the strength of competitive products and their relationship with customers from each segment; competitors’ willingness and ability to defend their turf to protect existing relationships; each customer segment’s perceived importance and uniqueness of your product and the meaning of your brand offering in the category; and your company’s strengths in competing for the chosen customer target.
2. ***Test your way to the top*** - Careful study and planning doesn’t necessarily result in a fail-proof strategy. The real proof comes in our ability to achieve success in reaching our

goal. What looks like a solid hand or foothold may prove to be inadequate leading to a slip or, worse yet, a fall. So, it is important to test your way to success. You take small steps from a secure base to feel if the wall's feature or protuberance you plan to take will support you. Likewise we need to find ways of using marketing research and market testing to determine if the segment we plan to choose will support our brand. Among the types of testing we should consider include concept testing, clinical and home use testing, testing of product prototypes (with and without concepts) and, certainly, limited geographic market testing. Nothing beats in-market testing to our way of thinking. It is as real as it gets. You have to translate strategy into effective execution. And, you have determined competitors who will attempt to thwart your every move just as the climbing wall and mountain will exert its nature. (For a full range of testing options check with your marketing research team members. Let them know what you want to learn, and be clear on your objectives, and they will assist you in determining what research methodology may work best.)

3. ***Focus on the customer target at hand*** – Climbing requires our full attention. In practice we were so focused on our current position on the wall that we were oblivious to how high off the ground we had ascended. (Don't look down! It can be scary.) Similarly, we need to keep our target segment and customer in focus. We need to learn and know our target so very well that we can predict how s/he will respond to a piece of stimulus. Every one of our marketing mix elements and tactics represent stimulus for our intended target. Importantly, we should only employ stimulus that will get the target to behave in a predetermined manner that favors our brand. What we mean is that the stimulus we choose should lead to a specific, intended behavior such as stimulating switching, penetration, compliance, etc. However, we get so engrossed in ourselves, who we are and what we need, that we oftentimes lose focus of whom and what really matters, our target customer and her/his needs.
4. ***Don't over reach your grasp*** - It's important not to over reach. Specifically we tend to be a bit too ambitious. While being ambitious is admirable we have to be careful we don't go too far. We think we can stretch and reach for a foot or handhold that is really beyond our reach. When we spring off our present position we can find ourselves grasping at air and losing precious gains. It can be the same for our brand. We stretch it to such lengths in the name of growth that the brand loses its meaning with the target customer. At one time each of the automotive divisions of General Motors was intended for a specific and different target audience (i.e., market segment). But the appetite for growth led many of these divisions to stretch and reach into different market segment. This resulted in a sameness that undermined the meaning each brand had once built its reputation and business. Marketers will not only attempt to over reach the meaning of the brand name but also their brands' target customer segment. This requires dilution of the brand meaning in order to satisfy a different segment and contributes to this age of sameness. This is not to argue against brand expansion and equity. Nor is this to argue against a broadening of the target segment. All things in time. All things being faithful to your brand's meaning and the equity customers are willing to bequeath it.
5. ***Never, ever, take your target customer for granted*** – Veteran mountain climbers reveal that the most dangerous time during an assault on a mountain is just prior to reaching the peak, and on the way down. There is a tendency to relax and grow complacent because

success is at hand, or has been achieved. But real success is not just about reaching the summit but also getting back down safely so that someday you may be able to recount your exploits to your grandchildren. Marketers grow complacent with seeming leadership in a category and/or a consistent track record of successes. They begin to believe that they are invincible and whatever they do will bring success. They become “me” focused and, like General Motors once believed, they believe that what is good for them is good for the customer. We should keep in mind that we need to better satisfy customers than our competition if we are to create and maintain brand loyalty. Given this age of sameness and economic uncertainty customers are investigating their options. They are no longer mindlessly making purchases out of habit. They are examining alternatives. And, in the absence of meaningful differences customers are choosing to take the value route. Consequently, customers need to be won and re-won. It’s not about what you did for them yesterday but what you are doing for them today. And, by the way, don’t even think about abandoning current for future customers. It never works out that way.

There is a steep and slippery slope to creating brand loyalty through customer selection, acquisition and retention. It takes a thorough understanding of a strategically selected and appropriate target customer along with careful planning, thoughtful strategizing, reliable testing, BIG ideas and faultless execution to win customers and drive brand preference.

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