

DISPATCHESTM

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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IS YOUR ADVERTISING A CLICHÉ?

Cliché (klee-**shey**), noun, 1) A trite, stereotyped expression, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse;

2) (in art, literature, drama, etc.) a trite or hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation;

3) anything that has become trite or commonplace through overuse.

Far too many ads are clichés. They are trite characterizations that have been used ad nauseum, to the point that the category competitors they represent appear interchangeable. It is all one big blur to potential customers. They promise the same benefits. They share the same situations. The story they tell, and the way they tell it, is quite similar, if not identical.

For example, let's take the sanitary protection category. What's a sanitary protection ad without fresh-faced young women wearing white to cover her lower body, or without a blue dye demonstration showing that the product, well, absorbs blue dye? How about showing women on the beach or, even, turning cartwheels in front of others? There's an old joke that dramatizes this nonsense. It's about two brothers, one aged five, and the other eight. They go into a pharmacy and the younger one brings 3 boxes of tampons to the checkout counter for purchasing. The clerk looks down at the two young boys and asks the younger one, "Hey little fella, what are you gonna do with all those?" Before the five-year old can speak his older brother responds, "My kid brother doesn't know how to ride a bike, or swim, but he saw on TV that if you use these things you will be able to do both."

If you were to consider these advertisements they would have you believe that using sanitary protection will empower women to: achieve their dreams; get the guy; stand out in a crowd; feel fresh all over; achieve self-contentment in a topsy-turvy world. Poppycock!

Now don't get smug. This isn't limited to sanitary protection ads. It really doesn't matter the sector (e.g., consumer, pharmaceutical, etc.) or the category (e.g., sanitary protection, pain relievers, drug eluting stents, etc.). Virtually all have become clichés. What's a pain reliever ad without making a claim that it "works fast and is effective on the worst pain?" What's a pharmaceutical ad to consumers that doesn't make a claim going beyond the generic benefits (which all products in the class of drug deliver) of "efficacious, safe and tolerable?" How about those pharmaceutical ads to consumers that depict mature couples holding hands as they stroll along the beach, or in a field of flowers, with a golden retriever frolicking beside them? Consider pharmaceutical ads to health care professionals that feature patients sporting smiles of relief. Or, what about those medical device ads that showcase a surgeon performing an operation, or a static shot of the product, and/or a claim of "effective, safe and/or deliverable?" Think about the

financial services sector whose ads invariably portray consumers enjoying the good life, golfing, dining out, sunning on the beach. What are these if they are not clichés?

These ads just don't work, or work as hard as they could! Once something, anything, is overused to the point that it becomes a cliché it loses impact. Furthermore, when every, or nearly every, competitor is using the same clichés then potential customers will fail to distinguish any kind of meaningful difference that could lead to changing perceptions and driving preference for one choice versus another.

Break the Cycle

It's time to break the cycle. It's time to drop the clichés. What company can afford to burn money on advertising that runs less than full throttle, particularly in this "age of sameness," where customers have become much more price sensitive? All marketers, regardless of the level of success of their brands, need to create impact that is measured by real growth, and a higher multiple return on their advertising investment (ROI). That's exactly what the makers of Kotex are attempting to do with their introduction of the U by Kotex product line (March 2010), and their edgy, humorous advertising. The advertising parodies tampon advertising. One spot, "So Obnoxious," shows a beautiful young woman strutting towards the camera as she reveals the clichés of the genre: *"Hi, I'm a believably attractive 18 – 24-year old female. You can relate to me because I'm racially ambiguous, and I'm in this commercial because market research shows girls like you, love girls like me. Don't these angles make me seem dynamic? Now I'm going to tell you to buy something. Buy the same tampons I use because I'm wearing white pants and have great hair. Don't you wish you could be me?"* The commercial cuts to a super, "Why are tampon ads so obnoxious?" We then see a shot of the packaging with another super "Break the cycle."

By the way, U by Kotex is not only exposing the clichés of competitors but their own past advertising practices as well. In fact, many of the clips they use in the U by Kotex ads that parody the category advertising are pulled from their own commercial archives.

Who do we think we are fooling by falling in line with our competitors, and using the same old, tired clichés? Nobody. The customer is wise to our ways. A quote appears on their website from the brand's target customer, "Cartwheels are the last think I'd ever do on my period." So, duh, why do we do this?

Causal Factors for Cliché Advertising

One of the U by Kotex ads poses the question, "Why are tampon ads so ridiculous?" It's the same reason that ads from many categories are so ridiculous. They're clichés. There are a number of factors contributing to the development of ads that are clichés. Here are a few to ponder:

- ***Not having anything relevant, that is meaningfully different, to offer the customer*** – Hey, it's not just about the execution, it's also about the strategy. You create a strategic advantage when the Key Thought (benefit/belief) in the Essential Creative Brief is relevant and meaningfully different than your competitors. For example, as mentioned

earlier, claims like “efficacious, safe and tolerable” are clichés in the pharmaceutical world. Every sector and category has its clichés! Find them and bury them! Then find your unique selling proposition.

- ***Absence of a “legitimate” and “productive” customer insight*** – We’ve discussed this subject in many past DISPATCHES articles, and even offer clients a program on Discovering Customer Insights ([for information on this program please click here](#)). So, we’re not going to rehash it in this article. Customer insights are terribly difficult to discover. Suffice it to say, the discovery of a legitimate and productive customer insight provides you with an opportunity to set your brand, and its advertising, apart from the herd.
- ***Talking in a foreign language to your target customer*** – Advertisers speak a foreign language, a kind of code, that is manufacturer speak, not customer speak. It’s like advertiser and prospective customers come from different countries and, maybe, even live on different planets. While wearing white is the torture test for someone on her period, how real is that to the target? Conducting a pseudo scientific demonstration using blue dye isn’t what young women find intriguing, will enlighten them, or is likely to compel them to choose one brand over another. (By the way, would you allow us to come into your home to conduct a blue dye demonstration for your education, or enjoyment? Hardly!) A former intern at JWT (J. Walter Thompson) helped to come-up with the original concept for the U by Kotex ad campaign, and even starred in a pitch video. Perhaps, her youthful vision, attitude and straight talk helped her relate to the target in a way that is meaningful.
- ***Copy marketing research that drives sameness*** – Look we are not down on marketing research. We’re really all for it, if it is used intelligently. The fact is that everyone does the same research, learns the same things, adopts the same communication techniques (which are different than understanding and applying principles), and tells the same story. So, its no wonder competitors do the same things in the same ways. They converge, copy, repeat, and repeat, and repeat. It is the perfect mix for the nurturing of a cliché. Also we need to get smart with our marketing research. If you ask customers what they like, they will play back the clichés. But the issue isn’t what customers like to see (oh, I like to see a patient who is smiling) but whether they are motivated to change their behavior and purchase, prescribe, use or implant your brand.
- ***Lack of creativity*** – Now don’t go blaming this on your agency. We, marketers, need to hold ourselves accountable too. We need to be open to, and see the potential for, bold new ideas. We say that people who use speak using clichés are not very intelligent, or that they are lazy, or just not very creative. Well, what do you think it says about the brand that is doing the talking? Same thing! And, here’s another thing – all those executional considerations (which are really mandates) that marketers add to the creative brief, well, they’re clichés or will lead to advertising that is a cliché!
- ***Aversion to risk*** – Departing from the way we have always done things, and research tells us is what the customer wants, represents a risk. We can be fired for departing from the

conventional wisdom. But there is risk in doing the perceived “safe thing” when a competitor finds a new, more productive way and is able to steal share from our brands. Oh, and if you are stuck in a cliché it is only a matter of time before a competitor beats you out of the box and captures market share – from you. Keep in mind that risk is subjective, until it has been thoroughly investigated. If we do something different we may believe it represents a risk. But we won’t know if it really is a risk until we check it out, by dialoguing in the marketplace through sound marketing research, with current and prospective customers.

So, how might we “break the cycle?”

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. **Set the table for success** – Discover a customer insight that leads to a relevant, meaningfully differentiated Key Thought (belief/benefit) that will motivate customers to a predetermined behavior that favors your brand (like switching or trading-up, among others). Get out of the trap of offering the same generic benefits, which have no power to motivate customers to discriminate among the array of competitive offerings.
2. **Get real 1** – C’mon your target isn’t likely to achieve nirvana thanks to your product. It’s not realistic. They don’t believe you anyway. You’re only talking to yourself. Offer the prospective target customer something that is real, has meaning to them, and that they can really appreciate.
3. **Drop the executional considerations or mandates from the creative brief** – These are most typically dogma (that may, at one time, have had meaning to the target) that has been overused, and overexposed. These are highly likely clichés and will keep your agency creative personnel in a box, keeping them from doing their best work.
4. **Get real 2** – Talk to prospective target customers in a language that they understand and, importantly, can relate to. Listen to how prospective customers talk about your category of products and brands. Learn to talk like them.
5. **Dare to be different** – Look, if you are going to look and sound like every product in your category you’re going to retard the ability of the advertising to generate incremental sales and achieve a high ROI. See what is going on in your category. Make note of the similarities in claims, the stories, and how each goes about telling it. Avoid doing the same. Demand of the agency, and your management, that they do something that is different. (But remember, different unto itself is not necessarily a good thing. The difference must be relevant and meaningful to the target customer.)
6. **Demand a BIG, juicy Campaign Idea** – The idea is the thing! It will help you connect your brand with the target customer on an emotional level. What’s more, it provides you with the opportunity to reach out and connect with your target with integrated communications, such as that to be found in your website, promotion, packaging, merchandising, PR, etc. – not just your traditional advertising media vehicles. The U by Kotex messaging is more than an advertising idea. It is a marketing idea. It is a BIG Idea.

It is the basis for the brand, and everything it does. It is a movement to get real with women about a subject that is real to them.

7. **Reduce risk** – Check out the work with current and prospective customers. Make sure you have the right objectives for your research. Don't ask what customers like. Instead, ask: a) what is the benefit; b) is this relevant to you; c) is it meaningfully different than the competition/what you are currently using; and d) how "likely" would you be to purchase, prescribe, use or implant this product? Make sure that you go into your research with options. You will learn from each, which should help you to iterate your way to success.
8. **Get real 3** – As the late, legendary adman, Bill Bernbach, said: "It's not creative unless it sells." Measure results of your advertising against objectives. Find a way to measure the ROI to determine if what you are doing is the best right thing for your brand. By the way, at this writing, U by Kotex has achieved more than an 8% market share in the tampon category. We would imagine that the market share is even higher among their younger 14 – 22-year old target customer group. Regardless of whether it builds upon, or holds, its place it has certainly changed the dialogue in the marketplace.
9. **Visit the U by Kotex website** – Look to learn what they are doing and how they are doing it. Use it to spark ideas about what you can do to ensure your advertising is not, or does not become, a cliché. Here's the link www.UbyKotex.com

Get real. Don't be ridiculous. Drop the cliché.

Richard Czerniawski and Mike Maloney
Richard Czerniawski and Mike Maloney

Richard Czerniawski

.....
430 Abbotsford Road
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043
tel 847.256.8820
fax 847.256.8847
.....

reply to Richard:
richardcz@bdn-intl.com or
rdczerniawski@cs.com

Mike Maloney

.....
1506 West 13th Street, #17
Austin, Texas 78703
tel 512.236.0971
fax 512.236.0972
.....

reply to Mike:
mwm@bdn-intl.com or
mikewmaloney@gmail.com



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