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Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

Sunday, March 9, 2008

IT TAKES TRAINING TO “UP YOUR GAME”

Starbucks' is in the news yet again. On February 26 the company closed the doors of its 7,100 U.S. coffee houses for 3-hours (starting at 5:30pm). The reason for the closure was to conduct a nationwide training event designed to energize its 135,000 partners (baristas), (re)train them in the art of pulling the perfect shot of espresso and, thereby, transform the customer experience. In other words, Starbucks is attempting to “up their game” in the quest to regain a competitive advantage.

Chief Executive Howard Schultz, who recently took back the reins of the company amid a slide in the company's stock price of some 50% since the end of 2006, concerns that it was losing its edge, and increased competition from McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts, said the goal of the closure was to improve the "Starbucks Experience." The company, which has prided itself on its coffee, has long recognized that the value of the brand and its customers' willingness to pay a premium price for its beverages is in the experience it delivers to its patrons. The Starbucks' experience is mixture of service, ambience and coffee.

Mr. Schultz, who has a passion for coffee and all things Starbucks, wants this passion to be shared by each of the company's baristas and reflected in their dealings with customers in consistently delivering the Starbucks' experience. He says, "We are passionate about our coffee. And we will revisit our standards of quality that are the foundation for the trust that our customers have in our coffee and in all of us." This is one of several big moves being spearheaded by Mr. Schultz to perpetuate excellence and bolster competitive performance.

This reminds us of a pointed question that one of our clients poses to his direct reports, “If we need to increase the business by 12%, and resources are flat (or declining), then what % do your people's competencies need to be increased to achieve it, and how are you going to get them there?” Part of the answer is we have to “up our game.” Another part is “training” that is practical and immediately applicable.

You've heard the expression before, “up your game.” It means to take your game to a new, higher level that encompasses both intensity and performance. Up your game. It's the only way we at BDNI know how to play at the game of life, brand building and marketing. “Up” is not a noun but a verb to indicate what it is that we are going to do – raise the bar of individual and collective performance. Many marketing departments are setting a goal of achieving marketing excellence in order to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace and undertaking steps, and even programs, to up their game. However, few will be successful in upping their game to

achieve marketing excellence. While we acknowledge there may be some needed improvements nearly all will fall short of achieving “marketing excellence.”

Conceptually, that’s not all bad. Those companies and managers who understand the meaning of marketing excellence understand that it is a goal that is always beyond reach. As we approach achieving the goal those organizations that truly understand marketing excellence raise it higher. We raise the bar again and again because neither the marketplace, customers, or the competition are static. Things change and so should we. What was perceived as excellence yesterday may be perceived as merely average today. Yet as we stretch to a new goal in pursuing marketing excellence we bolster the performance of our brands in the marketplace.

This brings to mind a story about a European sculler who wins an Olympic gold medal. After the race his coach runs up to the sculler, locks him in a hearty embrace, kisses both of the sculler’s cheeks, slaps him powerfully on his back and magnanimously proclaims, “Take the rest of the day off. Tomorrow we begin training.” Startled and confused the sculler stammers, “But coach I’ve been training like a dog for years for this event and I just won the gold medal, which makes me the best in the world. I’ve been expecting to take a month or so off from training.” The coach frowns and replies, “Your winning time for this race won’t be fast enough to even qualify you for the next Olympics. If you want to repeat with another gold medal you will have to begin new training tomorrow!” Now, that’s about really upping your game.

But this is not about the conceptual side of achieving marketing excellence. It’s about the reality. The reality of the situation is you can never achieve marketing excellence without appropriate training and creatively applying what we learn. Training is the basis for enhancing personal and organizational competencies, which are essential for achieving marketing excellence and gaining (or maintaining) a competitive advantage. It is a vehicle for raising the performance of the individual manager and the entire marketing team (i.e., agency, MRD, promotion group, R&D, etc.).

Like everything else we are not talking about training for the sake of just doing something. That will not bring on marketing excellence. Instead, we are referring to training core competencies that will have a direct influence on development as realized by exceptional performance in the marketplace. Just as the Starbucks’ baristas need to be able to pull the perfect shot of espresso and the sculler needs to harness his power to cross the finish line first we need to be able to apply what we learn in a way that clearly demonstrates we have “upped our game” – getting results!

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

This will answer questions about getting training to help you “up your game,” and your organization’s, in: a) achieving marketing excellence; b) doing more with less; and c) gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage (both personally and for your brand!).

1. ***Who needs training?*** This is a question that really and truly baffles us at BDNI. EVERYBODY needs training to nurture personal development and continue to build skill mastery. We would not be surprised if Howard Schultz took time to rethink and practice himself what is needed to pull that perfect shot of espresso. Professional athletes undergo rigorous training and retraining daily in the basics of their sport. Who is it that believes

s/he cannot benefit from training and benefit the organization as a result of it? Just because one has an MBA does not mean that one knows and can do it all. (Try sitting-in on a copy meeting for a taste of what many marketers do not know and, more importantly, cannot do to add value to the agency's creative submissions.)

The most frequent culprits of ignoring a personal need for training are senior marketing managers. Some of them truly believe they know and can do it (all?). These folks unwittingly sabotage the development of their direct reports by failing to recognize and institutionalize quality processes and tools (like The "Essential" [Creative Brief](#)) designed to enhance performance. Moreover, they sap morale by thwarting the progress and enhanced capabilities of their direct reports by speaking another, outdated language (one which is not built upon principles essential for success, quality processes that lead to more predictable outcomes and tools that increase productivity).

Also, the most "frequent" excuse for not getting training, regardless of level in the organization, is a lack of time. It seems the lack of time is the most frequent excuse for many of the important things we fail to do in and with our lives. But if we do not take the time for training each of us, and our organizations, will experience opportunity losses. While we may not be able to quantify them they are nonetheless there. (Perhaps the most grievous errors are ones of omission and not knowing that we don't know.) The opportunity losses grow evident through: a slip in quality; increased dependence on price promotion; slowdown in growth; failure to get that promotion; loss of brand loyalty; competitive inroads into our business – among others.

2. ***What training should I pursue?*** We need to train for what we will need to do to achieve marketing excellence, do more with less, grow our brands and ourselves, and gain and maintain a competitive advantage. We are talking about the core competencies for **brand** marketers. It is amazing how organizations will take years to identify the core competencies their marketers must possess. (And, by the time it takes to complete the study a new management team is injected and, you guessed it, the study is either dropped or renewed. All the while marketers wallow in doing things the same things the same way without getting the results they need.) There is no secret to what competencies are important if we are interested in building brands, and not merely selling products. Some of the most important competencies that we must train and retrain ourselves include:

- Developing a competitive, ownable and enduring [Brand Positioning Strategy Statement](#);
- Identifying and analyzing competitive positionings and identifying the implications for your Brand Positioning Strategy;
- Segmenting the market;
- Choosing the [Customer Target](#) and defining it completely and clearly;
- [Discovering Customer Insights](#);
- Developing SMART objectives (i.e., specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound);
- Providing clear, strategically appropriate direction to support groups to achieve SMART objectives;
- Developing an actionable [Creative Brief](#);

- Creating quality processes that contribute to enhancing the likelihood for success in any marketing endeavor;
 - Assessing and coaching work from others (peers, support groups, direct reports) that adds value to the ultimate product;
 - Doing a SWOT analysis (which is one thing everyone believe s/he knows how to do but we see very few that are done well);
 - Identifying critical success factors and actions steps for achieving them;
 - Conducting a whole product performance analysis;
 - Developing a marketing plan that marries business and brand building; etc.
3. ***What kinds of training programs are best?*** The best training programs are those that don't tell you "what" to think but, instead, teach you "how" to think. The first type of programs, that stress "what" to think, tend to be very dogmatic. Keep away from them. They make robots not competitive marketers. The second type, that focuses on "how" to think, leverage your experiences and unique talents. They help you realize all that you can be. In an age of sameness, where products and services competing in the same category are basically indistinguishable from each other, how you think is your strategic advantage in gaining a competitive edge.

Another consideration is about building skills. One does not know unless one can actually do. It amazes us to hear managers say that they know all about brand positioning yet they lack a [Brand Positioning Strategy Statement](#) for their product. Or they have written many Creative Briefs but they fail to achieve leadership communications. The goal of the training program should be to actually develop the requisite skill to perform the required tasks in an exceptional way. Interactive programs that blend proven principles with hands-on application work best.

Also, it is best that these programs be designed and taught by practitioners with significant levels of experiences and track records of success in doing what you hope to learn. They appreciate your needs and will be able to relate their experiences to you in a meaningful way. It also helps if they are teachers and not merely trainers so they can help you learn how to learn.

Everything about your training should be practical and immediately applicable!

4. ***Where can I find training programs that are appropriate for me?*** The first place to look is in-house. Check with your training manager (if you have one) or human resources (if you don't have a training manager). Another action is to check with professional associations. Search the web (and, please, make it a point to see what we are offering at www.bdn-intl.com). And, ask around. Find out what training others in the marketing department have gone to, where they received it, what they learned and what they think of their training.
5. ***How can I participate in BDNI training programs?*** There are two ways. The first way is to have a customized client program for your company. Go to BDN Institute and click " " for a listing of programs or just give us a call. The second is to attend one of our Open programs. We will be conducting a 3-day [Brand Positioning & Marketing](#)

[Communication College](#) (BP&MC) in Evanston, Illinois, on 13 - 15 May. It is the only Open BP&MC program for the year. If you are interested click on the registration “burst” on the home page or on the BDNI Institute icon on the left side of the page for more information, then on “Open” and then on the BP&MCC for program specs. It will also enable you to navigate to an agenda and several pertinent areas of interest. Or, if you would like to speak with someone, please don’t hesitate to call Lori Vandervoort at 800 255-9831 (in the U.S.) or 620 431-0780 (outside of the U.S.). But please don’t delay because class size is limited and will be closed once the class is filled. If Starbucks can afford to devote one-half million hours to training you can afford, and owe it to yourself and organization, to invest 3-days in your professional development.

If you want to achieve marketing excellence, do more with less, and gain and sustain a competitive advantage (for yourself, organization and/or brand) consider training as one key component to “up your game.” Consider registering for the BDNI [Open Brand Positioning & Marketing Communication College](#) in Evanston on 13 - 15 May. We hope to see you there!

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If you have any problems registering for the Open BP & MCC, please contact Lori Vandervoort at our Central Division Offices of BDN International, 800-255-9831 or 620-431-0780 or loriv@bdn-intl.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

