

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

March 4, 2007

LOOK ELSEWHERE TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

“The expert sees but one solution. Those with beginner’s mind see many.”
Buddhist belief

What can the healthcare industry learn from the aviation industry? If you are a “purist” who thinks his/her business is different than anything else then you might say, “nothing much really.” Yet, hospitals are beginning to explore adopting the safety techniques of cockpit crews to reduce preventable medical errors. You see both industries suffer serious consequences as a result of human error. Aviation safety techniques found to work in the cockpit to prevent airline accidents may very well work to eliminate many of the 98,000 patient deaths brought about by medical errors. Evanston Northwestern Health Care, in Illinois, is one of a growing number of hospitals banking on it.

Learning from other categories within your industry, other industries and even areas outside the world of commerce is not something new. The really smart operators have been doing it for quite some time. They recognize the existence of *universal principles*. It’s the application that may vary from one field to another. Principles are derived from *fundamental laws* of how things work (like the Tao Te Ching) while application is an art form to optimize their workings.

Conducting a detailed study of one’s category (such as skin care or proton pump inhibitors – whatever your category competes in) is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a positive. It can cultivate understanding regarding the way, and maybe even why, things have been and are.

But *category-dwellers* focus exclusively on their category, ignoring what may be learned from the world around them. They blindly lionize and follow category techniques (such as exhibiting beautiful young models in skin care ads or adopting the language “powerful” to describe proton pump inhibitors’ in their marketing communications). As such they are not likely to bring about meaningful new thinking and spur breakthroughs. Their narrow field of vision will merely contribute to the *status quo* and perpetuate this *age of sameness*. They need to expand their field of vision and *break-with* the conventional wisdom.

Company-dwellers, those who limit their study to their company, are even far more handicapped than *category-dwellers* in effecting change to gain a competitive advantage. These managers deceive themselves that the way their company does things is the “best” or only way. In many cases they underestimate their competition and go so far as to discount them internally. They tend to worship at the altar of mindless and/or unproven techniques, confusing them with and missing the inherent understanding of principles, imposing rigid mandates for execution.

Both *category- and company-dwellers*, and their organizations, might point to past successes to justify their actions. But it has been evidenced many times that success breeds failure. Missed opportunities result from the underlying complacency, arrogance and/or ignorance underlying this approach to learning and development. At the very least there is no guarantee that what brought success in the past will translate to the future.

Marketects, those that bring about disruptions to cause a disequilibrium in a given category by orchestrating a change in customers' perception of the marketplace that positively influences customers' preference for their brand, are neither category- nor company-dwellers. They are likely to come from outside the category. Why? For one reason they have a unique perspective regarding the category, its customers, etc. For another, they don't play by the unwritten "rules" followed by those comprising the category establishment. For yet a third reason, they are open to new ways – learning, borrowing and adapting from other categories, industries, countries and, even, fields.

Steve Jobs of the IPOD, Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic, Howard Shultz of Starbuck's and Anita Roderick of the Body Shop are those who come to mind as being Marketects. For example, Howard Shultz's inspiration for the Starbuck's that we know today is the coffee bars in Milan, Italy. Antonio Gaudi's inspiration for his distinctive yet highly practical architecture (e.g., Casa Mila, Park Guell, etc.) is nature itself.

Global client companies, particularly with multiple divisions (even crossing business sectors) should leverage training and development opportunities by mixing managers from the various divisions. Mixing managers from different sectors or different countries stimulates *shared understanding*. Moreover, managers need to hear, see and work with brand case studies from other industries and categories to gain an understanding of universal principles and appreciation for different execution applications. With the right people, it can trigger lateral leaps that contribute to creating breakthroughs.

Recently I attended the "Silk Road" Exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute. The Silk Road was not one but a tributary of roads between China and Europe. Silk flowed from West to East. In exchange horses were herded from East to West. One can only imagine the incredible mix of cultures coming together to engage in commerce. At one point in this fascinating exhibit I came across a narrative titled "Transformation" which is framed on a wall in one of the museum's wings. There it is written "*Contact with other cultures often provokes a profound change in the creative process, causing artists to see the world differently and, in turn reengage the power of objects within us. It also may inspire artists to adopt and continue aesthetic traditions, giving established forms unexpected, novel meanings.*" In other words, contact with other cultures whether they be categories, countries, etc., cause a transformation that spawns new creation.

When East meets West and North meets South we can expect something new to be created. When marketers expand their vision to, and understanding of, what is going on in other categories, other industries, other countries, other fields, we can expect transformation. While it is too early to determine if cockpit procedures will work in health care to reduce medical errors, one thing is clear: looking elsewhere will encourage a transformation resulting from new questions and learnings, and openness to change.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. Start by identifying those laws and principles that drive favorable change in your industry, category and company. No, we are not contradicting ourselves. Knowing and understanding the “universal principles” as opposed to “lionizing” techniques is what we are talking about. When the universal principles are understood the marketer is free to create novel techniques to bring about customer preference.
2. Look to other sectors, industries, categories, countries, eras in time, etc., to provoke new thinking. Look to see how they solved a similar problem to the one you are facing, exploited an opportunity or created a disruption in their market. Identify the principles underlying their success and apply it against your brand. Be creative.
3. Hey, don't stop there. Look to other fields of study. Ethnographic research, which is gaining popularity today in developing a better understanding of customer psychology and discovering customer insights, comes from the field of cultural anthropology, not business. Engage your mind's peripheral vision to gain a better understanding of the principles and to trigger *lateral thinking*.
4. Read Edward DeBono's book “Lateral Thinking” if you haven't done so already. If you have read the book don't just sit there - reread it! We tend to see new things, and gain a better appreciation for others, when we revisit a book, story or program.
5. Seek to become more “worldly.” Parochial thinking comes from parochial living. Nations that isolate themselves become xenophobic. We doubt it is any different with companies or its managers. Travel, reading, movies, etc., that go beyond our world tend to evoke understanding and empathy. While you are at it, surrender and allow yourself to be surprised.
6. In the immortal words of George Bernard Shaw, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy ask “why not.” (“Some people ask ‘why,’ I ask “why not’.”) In other words use your imagination to find connections and make things work for you.
7. If you haven't attended the BDNI Brand Positioning & Marketing Communications College consider participating in our Open program. Meet and work with marketing managers in attendance from diverse industries, categories, companies and countries. Expand your vision while you learn from others. The program will distinguish universal principles and best practices from techniques as executed across many industries and countries. It will be conducted on 1 – 3 May 2007 in Evanston, Illinois. For more information or to register please go to bdn-intl.com or contact Lori Vandervoort at 800 255-9831.

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*Our next Open Strategic Positioning & Communications College
is scheduled for May 1-3, 2007 at the Hotel Orrington in Evanston,
Illinois. To reserve your space or for more information,
Please call Lori Vandervoort
at 800-255-9831 (620-431-0780)*

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