

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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THE MISLEADING “F” WORD - IN MARKETING

Once a fellow-marketer was asked what successes and failures he had had in his marketing career. In response, he wasted no time in enumerating one success after another. But, when asked again about “what failures” he stopped abruptly, as if momentarily stunned, and flatly replied, “I’ve never had a failure.” Perhaps, each of us, if asked the same question, would respond in exactly the same way as our fellow-marketer...because, well, no one *really* wants to admit of a marketing failure (or, any kind of failure, for that matter) and for sure, no one wants the dreaded “F-word” attached to his or her name.

But here’s the ironic thing: as much as we hate to have the “F-word” attached to *our* names, we rarely have a problem attaching it to another’s name. Time and again, when we are working with our various consumer, pharmaceutical, and medical clients—whether in training situations or in actual consulting assignments—we hear some of them refer to marketing efforts by other brands that “failed.” In fact, the usual expression we hear is, “Oh, I heard that was a failure.” Or we’ll hear something like, “I know someone at that company and they said that failed.”

Failure’s always a pretty strong and clear-cut assessment, wouldn’t you agree? It doesn’t seem to allow for any “fudge-factor,” or any contextual exceptions and explanations. It’s definitely a “black” not a “white” or even a “grey”. Maybe this is so because all of us learn very early in life—in school—that one who fails does not progress on to the next level, and even more humiliating, carries the stigma of having failed while his peers have succeeded. Despite the dictionary’s allowance for some gradation in the definition of the word failure (from “lack of success” to “something less than that required”), for most people failure means, quite bluntly, “it didn’t work at all.”

Probably no example of this kind of assessment (among marketing folks) has been more prevalent in the last few years than that of the Dove Brand and its “Campaign for Real Beauty.” Though this idea is now mostly “yesterday’s newspaper,” it remains a volatile subject when brought up among many marketers—especially FMCG marketers. To the point, it came up once again recently as we were portraying the 3-5 year “Campaign for Real Beauty” as an example of a fully integrated idea, or in today’s more popular parlance, a “360° Campaign Idea.” And while we were making no value judgment about the campaign’s results, several of our clients immediately expressed a disparagement of the idea and said, “Oh that was a total failure.” But was it, really?

If you examine *some* of the documented facts about the results of the Dove campaign, it is pretty hard for any fair-minded person to declare the idea a total failure, as in “it bombed.” Clearly, the

brand did not achieve significant growth in all the international markets where the idea was implemented. But—for a period of time—the brand did achieve sales and share growth in by far the majority of the markets where it was implemented. In the US market, *Advertising Age* magazine documented the brand's total sales growth as follows: "12.5% in 2005 and 10.1% in 2006...over two times faster than the category growth." Is this failure? Looking at Dove brand growth in 2007 at 1.2%, one could surely conclude that the campaign was not driving the kind of growth of the previous two years; one could go even farther and suggest that the idea was running out of steam and, most likely, not lasting nearly as long as Dove marketers had expected. But failure? Honestly, who would classify double-digit sales growth by a big share leader (with just under a 50% share of bar soap) in an established, slow-growing category as a failure?

So what's the point? Actually there are two important points: (1) it is rare in marketing (or any endeavor) that an idea or initiative is a complete and total failure—there is usually an effect or two that is, truth be told, pretty good or promising; and (2) just as we marketers are quick to react to many creative ideas that our various agency partners design for us with a "I don't like it" or "Our consumer won't get it" or "This won't work," we marketers sometimes don't really *see* or *perceive* the whole picture. Regarding this second point, who knows why we often do not see or perceive the whole picture? Maybe it's because we jealously downplay the very-hard-to-come-by success of a Big Marketing Idea. Or maybe it's because we didn't come up with the Idea. Perhaps, most likely, we really don't have the facts.

Having said all of this, of course there many examples of new product ideas that were tested in the market—maybe even launched broadly—that were then summarily discontinued. Some of these were not merely re-tooled for a subsequent, more successful launch but were dumped in the "new product failure dust-bin" never to be heard from again (product ideas such as Clear Beer from Miller and Mid-Caffeine Coffees, and even last year's overnight replacement of the Tropicana Brand packaging graphics, which were just as abruptly reversed). So, yes, we could say that there are some out-and-out failures out there. But, we think it makes better sense to take a thoughtful, fact-based look at any marketing initiative before tossing in onto the dust-bin of failure. Why? **Because when we take a more disciplined look at these ideas and initiatives, we stand a much better chance to *learn* from them...maybe even to emulate those aspects of them that actually didn't fail, that worked to some degree.**

Our best advice: Think twice before using the "F-word" in marketing too readily or too cavalierly!

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

For additional perspective on this subject, here are few other "F-word" related examples and anecdotes to ponder:

- 1. New Coke.** The most talked about, ridiculed marketing move in history, right? Talk about a bald-faced product and marketing Failure! By itself, it was. But in the broader context of what its introduction and then removal did for Coke Classic, some have convincingly argued that this colossal marketing failure resulted in a dramatic net success for the Coke Brand. What's your take?

2. **Zimmer’s “Gender Knee.”** Most FMCG marketers wouldn’t even know of this marketing initiative from 5-6 years ago in the US. But marketers in the medical device business might well recall it. Most knee replacements, like most other medical devices these days, lack a meaningful design differentiation. To deal with this reality, the Zimmer marketers came up with the idea to designate their smaller-sized knee replacements (mainly designed for women) as the “Gender Knee—the Knee Women Are Talking About.” Other brands in the knee replacement category also had smaller-sized knees—they just didn’t call them anything special. For a period of time, Zimmer’s Gender Knee not only created buzz, but also delivered some growth for the brand...but, as you can imagine, their competitors (who did not come up with the gender-designating Idea) typically called the marketing move a “failure.”

3. **Master Card.** Now with its “Priceless” Campaign Idea in its 14th year globally, you might be surprised to see this listed as a perceived failure anecdote. Nevertheless, a few years back one of our clients—a company president, to be exact—had this comment after we shared a spectrum of impressive MC business results: “They may have built their volume over 7 years more than 60%, but I’ve never see it documented anywhere that they grew their share.” Excuse me? Oh, we get it—despite almost unheard of levels of sales and profit growth, let’s not be too quick to laud this Idea as a total success!

When you step back and think about it, more often than not, Success and Failure are usually in the eyes of the beholder. And, despite the facts, it’s not always so easy for us humans to give real credit where real credit is due...or for us humans to admit of our own shortcomings. The story is told of Oscar Wilde, the Irish playwright of some notoriety, who was approached by newspaper reviewers right after the opening night of a particularly poor show. Asked why his play was such a failure, Wilde is reported to have said, “Oh no, the play was a great success. The audience was a failure.”

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