

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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MARKETING TRAINING IN THE AGE OF SAMENESS

If you have been reading our weekly *Dispatches* for awhile now, you have no doubt heard us refer to the “age of sameness” that we marketers have been and are living in these days. And our notion of sameness refers not merely to the fact that so many products—in fast-moving consumer goods, drugs, and medical devices—perform similarly but also to the fact that so many marketers seem content to position their brands as an equally good choice (not as a better choice) to others in their market. Marketers often seem content to simply garner their “fair share” of the market.

This general trend in what we might call *declining competitiveness* is troubling for the future of any marketing organization because, at its most basic level, a marketing organization exists to get consumers and customers to perceive its brands as a better choice than others...and in so doing to engender as high a degree of brand loyalty as possible. Much of what we do when working with our clients is aimed at exhorting them and training them to develop differentiated products and position the brands that house those products as “better than” other options, as winning brands, not merely “evoked set” acceptable ones.

Unfortunately, though, even in the area of marketing training there runs a growing trend towards sameness. It shows up first and foremost in the overused curriculum term “Marketing Excellence.” So many companies seem to be commissioning joint Human Resource and Marketing function teams to devise their own brand of Marketing Excellence. But since it is one of our main jobs to train professional marketers, we are often asked to respond to a company’s “RFP”—you know, one of those Requests For (a) Proposal—and we can verify that virtually every one of them looks and sounds the same as every other. If you didn’t know better, you might think that there is a website somewhere out there where HR and Marketing curriculum designers can go and, using a standard format, create a set of principles, “core competencies,” and course descriptions to include in their RFP’s...kind of like those legal websites where you can go and, using a standard format, create your own living will or power of attorney.

What marketing organizations really need more and more critically these days is not some self-satisfying sound-byte label like “Marketing Excellence,” or some over-bloated fifty-page “RFP” that aims to make clear how this company’s curriculum demands a highly specialized and totally different curriculum, but rather an honest-to-goodness, highly practical series of marketing fundamentals workshops. We will share some of our ideas on what such a practical series of marketing fundamentals workshops would entail shortly; but first, let’s spotlight just a few of those “sameness” requirements that so typically show up in RFP’s (and that so typically provide no value-added).

Marketing Training Curriculum—Sameness Requirements That Add Virtually No Value

1. ***“Before any marketing training curriculum can be proposed, the Company must first identify the desired core competencies for the various levels within the marketing function.”*** Do you have any idea of how much time is wasted in re-identifying what competencies marketing organizations must exhibit? Most of these competencies are inherently intuitive; and for sure any senior marketer (like the Chief Marketing Officer, or a member of her or his senior staff) can rattle them off in a matter of minutes. And yet, it seems that curriculum design teams cannot pass go until they have articulated their own set of competencies. We can testify, though, that these competency sets end up looking like carbon copies from company to company.
2. ***“We must ensure that any nomenclature and formats we train with to express our marketing thinking reflect “The _____ (insert Company name) Way.”*** In other words, whatever ways we teach and employ to develop marketing strategies and plans must be exclusive to us. Toward this end, then, a great deal of effort is wasted in ensuring the training uses the positioning term “RTB” instead of “Reason Why” (as if such a choice made any difference in the net quality of the support for the positioning benefits). Or, worse yet, much consideration goes into supplementing a sure-fire, time-tested format—like adding a baffling “Single-Minded Takeaway” section to the Creative Brief’s Benefit section (again, only in an effort to make “our Company’s” brief appear to be unique). For sure it’s a good training goal to instill a common marketing language within the Company; but somehow thinking that one company’s choice of terminology or addition of a format element will make a significant difference in the marketing thinking output is, well, pretty naïve.
3. ***“Any training event must deal with real company products and brands—to show senior management that the training principles are being practically applied (and because we have real issues that must be addressed—we do not have the luxury of “lab learning”).*** Whenever we see this requirement in a company’s RFP, we know we are dealing with training amateurs (and we really do wonder what “one-size-fits-all” website they went to for the requirement). Training sessions that focus on a particular product’s or brand’s issues, looking for solutions to those issues, invariably result in less learning for the entire group...because everyone is geared toward finding the right answer rather than toward applying the learning principle at hand. To make matters worse, a good many of the training participants also become naturally defensive of their previous decisions, making for a lot of arguing but not a lot of marketing fundamentals learning.
4. ***“We want all training programs to demonstrate a return on the Company’s investment.”*** Actually, among the four “sameness” requirements mentioned here, this one has the ring of value-added to it. The problem is that, nine times out of ten, the Company has no real intention of enforcing the reading of return on investment. Face it, most companies’ marketing organizations don’t even consistently measure the return on investment of their *working* capital—things like advertising, PR, even promotion. So what a requirement like this ultimately becomes is a kind of lip service, something that a demanding company ought to be demanding of any would-be training supplier.

These, then, are the kinds of requirements that show up time and again in marketing organizations' curriculum plan and in their Request For Proposal documents sent to prospective training suppliers. And it's one thing that a given company includes them, thinking they are somehow doing something different (or even important) toward the development of their marketing training program. But the real shame of including these kinds of requirements is that it suggests not nearly enough critical thinking has been applied to the curriculum development. So what would we suggest for any Marketing and HR Team wanting to build a genuine program for fostering marketing excellence?

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

Some Sure-Fire Ways to Get a Best Practices Marketing Training Program Going

1. Skip the core competency research/consulting project. Use the experiences and talents of the senior marketers in the organization; they are well qualified to identify what competencies each level of marketing requires...and they can do it quickly.
2. Instead of relying purely on an internal team of HR and Marketing personnel to design the curriculum, seek out an experienced training company (like BDNI!) and tap into their abilities to design a curriculum. Better yet, ask them to validate the core competencies your senior marketers have articulated.
3. Insist upon simple, proven processes and formats for expressing the marketing thinking. In other words, don't fall into the trap of believing that unless a standard, proven format gets added to or customized, it isn't good enough for *our* organization.
4. Find a well-recommended and widely used "marketing fundamentals" workshop and run a prototype of it—now! The best organizations at working towards real marketing excellence are the ones that make something happen soon...with the same sense of urgency they have for the business.
5. Give us a call. You would be surprised at what we know about designing courses and curricula (oh yeah, and teaching them too).

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