

# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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Sunday, June 19, 2011

## THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF COACHING: FIELDING THE BEST TEAM

If you have been reading these weekly *Dispatches* for awhile now, or better yet, if you have participated in one of our *BDNI Institute* workshops, you know that we are champions of effective coaching. And by effective coaching we mean simply this: the skill of being able to consistently provide clear, simple, *value-added* direction—to any and every aspect of competitive brand-building (especially, brand positioning development, marketing plan development, insight discovery and articulation, communication brief construction, and 360° campaign idea creation).

Consistent with this championing of effective coaching, in every one of our workshops and “live” *Navigator* sessions we provide our clients with tips and techniques for more effective coaching, and we encourage them to practice these techniques during the events. The reason for this is simple: most of us have little or no formal training in “marketing coaching,” and none of us gets enough time to practice what coaching skills we do have anyway. You could argue that our focus on coaching is, therefore, very much coaching *during the game*. In other words, either by role-play simulation or in an actual live-brand situation, we aim to implement on-the-spot coaching of positioning statements, brand marketing plans, proposed insights, communication briefs, and so on...in real time, so to speak.

But, having just witnessed one of the more thrilling NBA Finals series in a number of years (won for the first-time ever by the Dallas Mavericks over the Miami Heat), and about to begin here in the United States our annual College Baseball “World Series,” we got to thinking about that other part of coaching—the part that happens *before, or in preparation for, the game*. Maybe we were influenced by so many of those ESPN commentators and analysts who frequently talk about how a given basketball coach will prepare for a given opponent by selecting the best possible “match-ups,” position by position. Or how a particularly successful baseball coach will select his fielding positions and batting “line-ups” to maximize the probable success against a certain opponent—especially the opponent’s starting pitcher. Whatever the influence, we wanted to bring attention to that “before the game” coaching...which may well be the most important coaching of all.

So, what in particular, are we referring to when it comes to “before the game” for marketing coaches? *We’re referring to assembling the best possible teams*. If you think about it, virtually every brand manager or brand team leader has numerous opportunities—practically every week—to select and “invite” various functional team members to a given project status meeting, brand strategy planning off-site, or some kind of innovation ideation program. But all too often, the “players” that end up being invited or asked to participate are an assumed given: if the brand is holding an important meeting or think-session of some kind, well then, of course all the usual

functional team representatives need to be informed and invited to attend—after all, this is the typical, corporate way that multi-functional teams keep each other informed of what’s happening. For simple project status meetings, this typical approach probably makes sense.

But, if you think differently about other types of off-sites and think sessions (for example, if you think of these as critical strategic and/or creative output workshops), simply informing and inviting the “usual suspect” functional team members is probably not the way to *assemble the best possible team* for the outputs required. As an analogy, consider how almost all brand marketers typically think about the creative teams within the agencies their company employs: we have never met a brand manager, marketing director, or chief marketing officer who did not expect and routinely request that the agency put their “very best creatives” to work on their brands. Who doesn’t know, after all, that your chances of getting bigger and better ideas are much greater when the creative talent behind them has a long and successful track record? We always want the “top creative talent” from our external resources on our business; why do we not also always want (no, insist upon!) the top strategic and creative talent from our available *internal resources*?

We have a couple of hypotheses that help to explain this odd inconsistency:

- 1. Force of habit.** As we’ve already noted, whenever there is an important brand meeting or session planned, the longstanding habit is to “check-off” the list of brand team representatives from Market Research, Legal & Regulatory, Sales Merchandising, PR, and so on.
- 2. Lack of coaching skills.** Very simply, it rarely occurs to the brand leader that what is really needed is a thoughtful determination of what specific resources—both internal and external—will make for the highest probability of outstanding outcomes. Just like the baseball coach who must always set and re-set his line-up for the best possible outputs versus his objective (to win!), so must we as “brand coaches” set and re-set our talent line-up—depending upon what specific tasks we need to get done—for the best chances of better strategic and tactical outputs.

We are often asked when we are in the planning stages of, say, a *Brand Positioning Navigator* workshop with a given client, “Who should we invite to participate?” Naturally, we do not always know the individual players nor their talents, but we try to outline for our clients some of the types of talents that would give the team the best odds of success. In doing this, we sometimes put it to the client this way: “You have 12 chairs to fill at this upcoming *Navigator*. Make sure that each and every chair is filled with someone who is a natural at strategic or creative thinking (or, ideally, both). **Please** do not waste a chair by filling it with someone who is *attending* to see what’s happening, but who is not likely to be *participating*. We can inform them later of what happened and next steps.”

The importance of coaching by assembling the best possible team cannot be over-stated. Unfortunately, all too often it is simply overlooked. So, we hope that this week’s article will, at the very least, heighten the awareness of this aspect of coaching. Whether you look at championship teams in sports (like the Chicago Bulls or Manchester United), long-running and popular television shows (like *Frasier* or *Seinfeld*), or winning communication campaigns (like *MasterCard’s “Priceless” Campaign*), they all share one thing in common: the exceptional mix and level of talent of the players.

## BOATS & HELICOPTERS

1. For starters, think of each brand-team get-together as a creative head at an agency would about his next, big creative assignment: given the marketplace challenges, the experience levels of the agency talent, and the kinds of outputs the brand must have, *who* absolutely must be on the roster?
2. To get out of the old habit of simply inviting the assigned brand-team members, make an arbitrary decision to hold 65% of the “seats” only for participating, proven talent.
3. Take enough time to really think through what talent you need to achieve the outcomes you want. Include in your deliberations what *unexpected talent* you might draw upon—for example, we once conducted an ideation session for a beer marketer (who was looking for totally new ways to attract entry users) and we populated the session, in part, with a well-known cultural anthropologist, futurist, and event designer.
4. If it helps, imagine your next strategic or creative session is like producing a potential blockbuster movie: who will you put on the team for the best lighting techniques, for the best cinematography, for the best stunt-coordination?

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