

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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OWNING UP TO OWNABILITY

Ownable—The advertising (message and approach) are linked directly with your brand; any other brand would have a very difficult time copying it.

--Creating Brand Loyalty, Chapter 12

Whenever we ask clients to identify the criteria they most often set in judging whether an ad campaign is really great, we invariably hear something like “it should be ownable.” Granted, this is not typically the first, nor even among the first, criteria identified; but it **is** one criterion that almost always gets mentioned. The tricky part for many client-advertisers, however, is in going further—to explain what precisely they mean by the term “ownable.” When probed about this, some clients will simply say they mean the campaign embodies an idea that no other brand has ever thought of or used before. A few clients will suggest that ownability in campaign ideas traces mainly to “whoever came up with it first,” or stuck with the idea the longest. But we think there is more to it than this.

You can see in the above quote from our book how we prefer to explain the term ownability in advertising—meeting two conditions: (1) being legitimately linked with your brand, and (2) being either a message (as in a benefit) and/or an executional envelope that competitors could not easily copy. With so many parity-performing products in the market these days, you may be wondering, “when would a major brand ever find it not so easy to copy a competitor?” The answer most often is this: when that major brand has invested so much—advertising dollars, years of communication—into a particular position that they cannot abruptly run in another, almost opposite, positioning direction. Let’s take a look at a classic example of what we’re talking about: The Pepsi Generation advertising campaign, which ran for nearly 30 years in various iterations.

The Pepsi Generation campaign was truly in its heyday during the 1980’s. From our old files, here is a selection from a Pepsi-Cola Positioning Statement dated June, 1988, which reveals the consciously-constructed *strategic* direction the brand chose to gain some ownability:

In the twenty-five years since Pepsi Generation thematic advertising first aired, Pepsi-Cola has successfully created a distinct brand image in both the minds and hearts of consumers. It is an image based on the brand always standing for a contemporary, energetic, and positive portrayal of how Americans wish to perceive themselves and their society. Pepsi became, over these years, an emblem, a badge, a symbol of “living life to the fullest” with advertising that consistently redefined the optimum qualities of that life. An image which erased the previous “price brand” positioning and propelled the brand to a truly effective competitive positioning against Coca-Cola.

*The more recent expressions of the Pepsi Generation, executed under the “Choice of a New Generation” theme, separated us from the lifestyle imitations of the late 70’s and early 80’s by carving out new ground that we labeled “the Leading Edge.” They also reinforced our position as the “cola of choice” that the earlier Pepsi Challenge had established. **The objective of the “Leading Edge” strategy was to create advertising which would position Pepsi as the brand reflecting the high-tech, sci-fi, musically-oriented, modern, innovative, youthful energy of contemporary youth. In adopting this new position, we not only aimed our advertising at a critical demographic target, but also developed an executional style and substance which Coke could not easily or comfortably imitate.***

A style and substance which Coke could not easily or comfortably imitate...in other words, one that Pepsi could potentially own and Coke could not. Why not? Because Brand Coke had done such a remarkably deep-rooted job of establishing themselves as: for the entire family, nostalgic, classic Americana, ubiquity, and so on. Really, Coke’s position was anchored in just about the opposite position from Pepsi.

That was then. How about now? Has anyone today taken a page out of Pepsi’s positioning playbook and established a position—in a similarly, parity-performing category—that a key competitor could not easily or comfortably imitate? The brand that first comes to mind in response is MasterCard.

In the seven years since the MasterCard “Priceless” campaign started, no other ad campaign gets mentioned as many times as it does when we conduct our Strategic Ad College seminars. Many, many of our participants will cite the campaign as an example of really great advertising (principally on the basis of its enormous word-of-mouth presence); many will also speak with admiration of its universally-appealing, underlying campaign idea; and some will reference the volume growth MasterCard has enjoyed during the campaign’s run. But almost no one speaks to, or seems to appreciate, the campaign’s strategically brilliant ownability. In fact, we usually hear our clients saying something like, “Any other leading card could copy the MasterCard emotional benefit and executional style.” Not really.

In carving out a position during the waning 1990’s of being, effectively, the “un-badge credit card,” MasterCard was stymieing Visa and American Express in virtually the same way Pepsi did Coke fifteen years earlier. Both Visa and AMEX had been fighting each other for years for the title of “most prestigious” card; Visa, in particular, spent incredible amounts each year to establish the brand as the “everywhere you want to be” card. Suddenly, from out of just about nowhere, MasterCard makes being “the card for life’s precious, real moments” cool...and Visa is supposed to comfortably (or credibly!) imitate them? MasterCard’s ad campaign ownability actually links real nicely to the brand itself: for while Visa and AMEX were trying to out-do one another on the prestige scale, MasterCard continued to stand for utility, practicality, being down-to-earth.

We client-advertisers need to own up to the real concept of ad campaign ownability. It’s about a lot more than merely being first with an idea, or even spending the heaviest behind an idea. It starts with an ownable positioning!

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. Picking up on that last sentence, why would we expect our agencies to bring us something truly original, truly never-been-done-before unless we had first worked with them in articulating a potentially ownable positioning? If we want real ownability in our advertising, we ought to find that ownable positioning space in the marketplace first—and explore its potential with consumers.
2. Take that notion (expressed in the 1988 Pepsi Positioning Statement) of finding a position your competitors could not *comfortably* imitate to heart. In your category, given the equity within your key competitor's positioning, what would be some Targets, Benefits, or Brand Characters that the competitive brand would be most reluctant to follow? Might any of these work for your brand's bundle?

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