

# **DISPATCHES**<sup>TM</sup>

*Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front*

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## **POSITIONING: THE CONSUMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT**

It seems a long time ago now that, wherever we shopped, we did so with the assurance that retailers would do whatever it took to make us happy. They all wanted satisfied customers and just about all of them—from well-known retailers like Macy's to small-town mom & pops—operated under a simple principle: The Customer Is Always Right.

We were reminded of this now much-less-commonly-held principle just the other evening while watching an interview on Larry King Live between Larry and Jeanne Phillips. You may not recognize the name Jeanne Phillips, but you would most likely recognize her pen-name: Abigail Van Buren, or "Dear Abby" the world-famous advice columnist. (Actually, Jeanne is Abby's daughter, who took over for her aging and ailing mother a few years back.) During the interview, Jeanne spoke about a few of her and her mother's longstanding principles; one of these, she said, was that each advise-seeker is assumed to be telling the truth and to be "telling it like it is" (or, at least, telling it as he or she believes it is).

As a case in point, she described a recent letter from a caretaker of a non-compliant diabetic woman—a woman who was not taking her insulin or medication as her doctor prescribed. This caretaker sought Abby's help because, she claimed, her diabetic relative experienced significant mood-swings during those periods when she neglected to treat herself—mood swings that made her, in effect, downright nasty to be around. A few weeks after printing this letter, Abby printed another one—from a doctor who headed up a leading association of physicians treating diabetic patients. In this follow-up letter, the doctor pointed out that there was no clinical or pathological evidence to support the relationship between treatment non-compliance and personality mood swings described in the caretaker's letter. In fact, asserted the doctor, it was very likely that the patient described by the caretaker was suffering from some kind of mental disorder in addition to her diabetes.

What happened next is that Abby was inundated by thousands (not hundreds) of letters from diabetic patients and their caretakers all over the country. Each told the same story: the doctor did not know what he was talking about because each of them suffered from the same kinds of mood swing symptoms when they lagged in their treatment compliance. So there it is in action—the patient, consumer, customer IS right. Unfortunately, this doctor (and probably many others like him) will not see that his customer is right; too much arrogance gets in his way.

When you think about it, we marketers are often a lot like this doctor. We may not as openly scorn our consumers/customers, but we behave in routine ways that actually suggest we have little faith in what our consumers/customers think. Here are just a few of these behaviors...behaviors that imply the consumer/customer is, well, typically not smart enough to be right:

1. We embark upon a serious re-positioning effort for our brand without first confirming as precisely as we can what our current Brand Positioning really is—in the minds and hearts of our loyal consumers. In other

words, we assume that since our volume or share continues to dwindle, we must have a positioning problem. Indeed we might, but to make any directional moves without first taking stock of where those who know us (and like us!) best see the brand is not merely an oversight. It's dereliction of duty.

2. When exploring alternate positionings with consumers, we rely only on qualitative research for our decision-making. Even if this exploration includes some brand loyalists, how can we seriously think of a significant brand positioning change based on the input of, say, 25-30 people? And then there's the even more troublesome aspect to most qualitative research (especially of the focus group kind)-in this environment, consumers just as often tell us what they think we want to hear as they do what they REALLY think about the brand and its positioning. We simply must find other methodologies for giving the consumer an honest chance to "tell it like it is."

3. We create a new ad campaign that is devoid of any consumer insight (i.e., an attitude or behavior previously unknown, under-appreciated, or under-leveraged). Rather than building an Idea upon something truly relevant or eye-opening to the intended consumer, we prefer instead to tell about our product. Said another way, we employ advertising that tells the consumer what to think instead of advertising that allows the consumer to find out for herself/himself why our brand is their choice.

When we marketers routinely behave in these ways, we are, in effect, shutting the consumer/customer out. Somehow we all need to get back to that never-fail business-building (brand-building too) principle: The Consumer/Customer Is Always Right. We can't go wrong doing that.

#### **BOATS & HELICOPTERS:**

1. Find a way to assemble a panel or "advisory group" of your brand's loyal consumers/customers. Maybe this should be done on a regional basis. With all the technology options available today, there has to be a way to converse with them easily and often.

2. Create a detailed profile or character sketch of your bulls-eye consumer-give him or her a name too. And whenever you consider new directions or ideas for the brand, ask (and try to answer) "How would \_\_\_\_\_ respond to this?"

3. Set up an on-going Insight Exploration process with your research and R&D teammates. Share insight learnings at least once a quarter.

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