

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

Sunday, February 28, 2010

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Here are three stories for you:

- During the Chicago Bulls' successive NBA championship years, at one point in mid-season after very rare back-to-back losses, Michael Jordan was asked by a reporter, "What gives? What's the problem? How is it that the Bulls have lost two straight?" To which he calmly replied, "We just haven't had the time we need to practice." The reporter, thinking Michael was joking said, "Practice? Practice? What are you talking about—you guys are playing games nearly every night of the week!" But Michael wasn't joking; he explained, "Playing actual games isn't *practicing*. Practice—the kind we desperately need—involves working for hours on the fundamentals, like passing, rebounding, foul-shooting, and play-setting."
- Another basketball legend, the great John Wooden who coached the UCLA Bruins to so many NCAA National Championships, was once asked the secret to his legendary teaching methods. He said that teaching *any skill* (not merely basketball) required the following 8 steps to be successful:
 1. Explain the skill being taught
 2. Demonstrate the skill being taught
 3. Have students mimic the skill being taught
 4. Practice
 5. Practice
 6. Practice
 7. Practice
 8. Practice
- Experts (of any particular skill) say that it takes an average of 10,000 repetitions of something to reach a consistent level of expertise. In fact, some point out that there are really only 4 levels of expertise that anyone can reach (with the first one being, really, no expertise at all):

Lowest Skill Level: *Unconscious Incompetence* ("I'm screwing up but I don't even know it.")

Next Highest Skill Level: *Conscious Incompetence* ("Darn! I made that mistake again.")

Next Highest Skill Level: *Conscious Competence* (“If I really concentrate and use my checklist, I can do this pretty well.”)

Highest Skill Level: *Unconscious Competence* (“I’m so skilled at this it comes naturally to me—like breathing.”)

Getting those 10,000 repetitions required to reach Unconscious Competence takes practice!

Okay, so you get the point. Practice is an essential—for anyone who is seriously determined to reach a consistent level of performance and to keep trying to take that performance to the next level. Certainly, one cannot imagine any sports team reaching playoffs or championship games without unrelenting practice. But here’s the funny thing: why do we marketers expect our Brand Teams (including our outside agencies) to perform at playoff level, to produce even better work the next time, when we virtually ignore the practice of, well, practice?

Really, it’s a most obvious, but seemingly never uttered, question—why **don’t** we get together as a team on a regular basis to practice our most basic (and critical) marketing skills...like crafting or evolving a Brand Positioning Statement; like articulating a tight Creative Brief (including those all-important brief elements such as Marketing Behaviors and Consumer/Customer Insights); like assessing the strengths of various Campaign Ideas? (Please don’t accept the Michael Jordan explanation that the Brand Team is too busy playing the daily game to practice the fundamentals!)

Each week when we have the opportunity to work with our clients in both consulting and training assignments, we are reminded of the pent-up demand among all marketers to practice more frequently what they are trying to do in their day-to-day brand-building. We can sense the eagerness with which our clients assess a Communication Strategy or an Advertising Idea; their enthusiasm in expressing their own “takes” on these things is palpable. And, invariably, they tell us the same thing again and again—namely, “We just don’t do enough of this!” So, for this week’s Boats & Helicopters, we would like to suggest some of those essential brand-building skills we definitely ought to be practicing with our teams.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS - Fundamentals “Drills” for Brand-Building Teams to Practice

- 1. Articulating a Legitimate Insight**—Among the most difficult things for marketers (clients and their agencies) to do is to express an honest-to-goodness consumer/customer insight—in a way that others on the team can universally agree is an insight. There are two prevailing reasons why this expression or articulation is typically so difficult: we get into the bad habit of confusing a *need statement* with an insight (as in, “I wish someone would make a blackhead remover that penetrates down deep into the pores.”); and, you guessed it, we simply do not practice writing hypothetical insights down and then having others respond to them. The more we share expressions of hypothetical insight statements, the better we are able to perceive what separates legitimate insights from needs, facts, and what some call, accepted consumer beliefs.
- 2. Setting Marketing Objectives (Desired Consumer/Customer Behaviors) with Precision**—Most marketers have little difficulty determining the broad marketplace goals their brand must achieve—such as growing market share by 1-2 points over the coming year. But the same cannot be said when it comes to determining the underlying behaviors

that a brand must instill among its consumer or customer target...such as increasing the number of new category users or incenting current brand users to buy, use, or prescribe the brand more frequently. So poorly practiced is this “mathematical foundation” for any marketplace goals that many marketers, in fact, confuse a Business Objective (like share growth) with a Marketing Objective (the behavior that results in that Business Objective). That’s why this skill cannot be practiced enough—to include stating the expected percentage change in behavior and the exact timeframe for that expected change.

3. **Inferring Key Competitors’ Brand Positioning Statements**—We often urge our clients to set aside some time every trimester for the Brand Team to spend part of a day together sorting through the various marketplace “touch-points” of their key competitors (their products, packaging, promotions, websites, advertising and so on). And, following this sorting process, having smaller sub-teams take shots at practicing inferring what the brand positioning of each competitor must be, given these touch-points. Such an exercise not only provides updated thinking on what the competition is up to; it also sharpens the brand positioning skills of the entire team. As we have learned time and again, if you want to get better at crafting a competitive brand positioning for *your* brand, there is no better practice than inferring brand positioning statements of other brands.

4. **Expressing and Assessing Campaign (Advertising) Ideas**—Even for longtime Agency Creative Heads, sometimes communicating what their Big Idea is in a few, succinct words can be tough. They may prefer to “act out” the idea instead of stating it. For sure, it takes a certain skill to routinely express a creative concept for a new campaign (what we often call a “Naked Idea”) in a sentence or less. And if agency creative folks find it challenging to do, you can imagine how hard it is for most client-types to do. Nevertheless, a great way to get better at *understanding* and *appreciating* real Naked Ideas is to practice inferring them from among current campaigns in the market. And this kind of practice works so much better--especially towards helping the client get smarter--when it involves both the internal Brand Team and the external Agency (Account Service and Creative) Team.

What’s the old adage, “Practice makes perfect”? Well, maybe “perfect” is a bit of a stretch; we think most marketers would be happy to settle for “Unconscious Competence.”

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