

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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THE END OF MARKETING TRAINING, AS WE KNOW IT?

“Marketing mediocrity is an oxymoron.”

–Denise Lee Yohn, San Diego Brand Consultant (from Brandweek)

It happened again last week. During one of our marketing fundamentals discussions with participants in a *Brand Positioning & Communications College*, one of them asked THE question: “Why is it that we learn all these essential, best practices about brand-building and marketing, but then when we go back to our individual operating divisions, our senior management fails to insist upon following them?” Asked another way, her question, quite simply, was “Why have all this great training without the on-the-job reinforcement?”

One obvious way of addressing a tough question like this might be, “While it’s unfortunate that instilling best practice, *corporate* marketing capabilities (from the training) isn’t happening, one big thing that **is** happening is the instilling of *personal* marketing capabilities.” But, in fairness, to someone who has just realized the critical value of crafting a competitive—as opposed to a “me too”—Brand Positioning Strategy Statement, or of adding the time and money-saving Campaign Idea step to the creative development process, this response isn’t very satisfying.

Why is it so common for so many corporations, including those that invest billions in marketing initiatives each year, to stop the training right after the training event? Even more ironic, why have a training curriculum that the company refers to as “Marketing Excellence” when those outside and above marketing do not demand that it be implemented? (Considering the quote above from Ms. Yohn, perhaps the converse is actually more to the point: Marketing Excellence is an oxymoron.)

As trainers and teachers of marketers over the past nearly twenty years, we have been part of and observed a range of marketing training curricula. And we have consistently urged our clients to keep the training going day in and day out by implementing the practices that marketers are learning. With some clients we have been able to conduct our *Coach’s Clinic* for senior management—an overview of the marketing processes, tools, and nomenclature that everyone in the organization should be using (not just in the annual, brand strategy and operating plans, but also in everyday work). With some clients we have been able to facilitate a marketing best practices implementation program; with others we have also been successful at “brokering” certain phases of the creative development process between the client and the communication agency. But, sad to say, all too many of our clients leave the implementation of their training outcomes to the personal leadership and influence of the individual. At best, then, “best marketing practices” implementation becomes hit or miss.

But there is some hope on the horizon. Lately, we have found a handful of clients who are taking a significantly different view of marketing training. In fact, while it seems at first merely symbolic, these clients have done away with the “t-word.” Quite consciously, they no longer refer to their marketing best practices learning and implementation as “training”...because the word “training” carries with it an outdated perception—it’s something that only happens in a classroom or at an offsite hotel. This is a little like what has happened in the soft drink world over the past few years: Coke and Pepsi have both recognized that the word “diet” is old, out-of-date, even “out-of-lifestyle” today—besides, everyone knows that real men don’t diet. So they consciously dropped the “d-word” as they launched new extensions (*Coke Light* outside the US, *Coke zero*, and *Pepsi Max*, for example).

Dropping the “t-word,” though is only the beginning, a way to set expectations. Of more substance are the following kinds of *requirements* that these few clients demand of their new approach to marketing training:

- 1. Conceiving of and calling the curriculum “Real Time Action Learning” or “Live Action Learning.”** The choice of each word is quite intentional--starting with the noun, “Learning,” which signifies that skills and processes are to be *learned*, internalized. As for the “Real Time” or “Live Action” part, this means, quite literally, that during the various learning workshops, *only* real brand-building and marketing issues and desired outputs will be worked. These are typically identified well ahead of time, and they fit with key projects brands have underway.
- 2. Conducting each workshop or seminar in the actual operating region or country.** In keeping with the required work against “live” brand issues, actual local marketing teams (and their key internal and external partners) come together locally to devote 2-3 days against the identified issues. And because each workshop happens only in a specified market, teams have the flexibility to go out in to the marketplace if need be.
- 3. Running a “Senior Management Overview/Reinforcement” session prior to the start of any regional or country workshop.** Along the lines of the “Coach’s Clinic” that we mentioned up-front, the idea of this critical step is to ensure senior management buy-in to the principles and processes to be taught to their marketing teams and to give the senior team the specifics they will need to “inspect what they expect.”
- 4. Limiting the actual “instruction” part of the workshop to no more than 50% of the total time.** Such a requirement ensures that the local teams will have at least 50% of the total workshop time to devote to actual application of the concepts and processes being learned...which fits perfectly with the longstanding, effective teaching approach we have always espoused: “I hear, I forget; I see, I remember; I **do**, I understand.”
- 5. Setting indicated action steps (sometimes called key performance indicators) coming out of the workshop—with a timeline.** Since the workshop participants are applying their learning against real-time brand issues and output needs (such as a competitive Brand Positioning assessment or a tight Creative Brief), it only makes sense to end the workshop or seminar with a set of precise next steps. Some clients even insist upon making these steps part of the individual participants’ performance review plan.

As you can see, with just these few stipulations, a traditional training curriculum can become a learning-implementation one. Of course, without on-going commitment to these requirements and the oversight of senior management, even the best-laid plans for a new concept of marketing training can drift. But, for anyone *really* serious about generating Marketing Excellence within and across the organization (if they are honest), this is what it takes.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

What can a lowly Assistant Brand Manager or junior Brand Manager do to “push” for continuing the training after the training?

1. Organize a “new view” internal team within the marketing ranks: ideally this would include a cross-section of more experienced and less experienced marketers who draft a set of “Real Time Learning” principles to be presented to senior marketing management.
2. Find and engage an HR “champion” at the outset. With his or her help, take an analytical look at other company functions (like Manufacturing and Sales) to see what implementation processes they have successfully used.
3. Try to benchmark what some other “marketing learning” organizations are doing. Maybe you need to request some funds for an external resource to do that benchmarking; or maybe, you can get many of the specifics from marketers already in your organization who have come from such companies.
4. Hire some outside teachers who also know a thing or two about *curriculum design*—like us, *Brand Development Network, International!* It always amazes us that so many clients who know us as experienced teachers overlook our many years of success in program and curriculum design.
5. Make something happen! Per the real story our colleague, Brenda Bence, has often told...if senior management doesn’t “get” the need for learning implementation, go ahead and hit them with this one: “OK, Senior Management, you’ve seen the plans we have to grow the brand 15%; what’s *your* plan to grow our marketing people more than 15%?”

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