

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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WHEN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS DON'T HAVE AN IDEA...

Week after week, in our *Brand Positioning & Communications College*, we find ourselves extolling the virtues of “having an idea.” No, actually, that’s putting it too mildly. We find ourselves passionately hard-selling our marketing clients on the “value-added of having an idea.” And when we speak about having an idea, we mean having one in the brand’s primary communications—whether those communications are in the form of advertising, digital media, merchandising materials, or sales aids. To be honest, we sometimes stop and ask ourselves a troubling question: “Since marketing people are by nature supposed to be ‘idea people,’ why should we find it so necessary to *sell* them on having an idea in their communications?”

Perhaps there is no one or simple answer to this troubling question. But one thing is for sure: when you survey a range of brand communications—it doesn’t matter if they are from consumer brands, pharmaceutical brands, or medical device brands—the percentage of those that contain an idea is pretty low. How do we know? We survey brand communications on our own all the time, and our clients share their own (and their key competitors’) communications with us all the time. Frustrated at times by the relatively low percentage of “Idea Communications,” we have occasionally written in these weekly *Dispatches* about the success of those brands that actually **do** have communications with an idea.

In fact, not more than three years ago one of our weekly *Dispatches*, entitled “Why Ideas Matter” outlined some of the compelling reasons for having an idea in the brand’s communications:

1. Having an idea (that rings true with the consumer) can give a parity-performing brand a perceived advantage—for example, the MasterCard “Priceless” idea.
2. Having an idea can mean the difference between having a customer or consumer acquaintanceship or building a real *relationship*—for example, Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty” idea.
3. Having an idea can make the brand’s positioning more differentiated—for example, HSBC’s “Local Customs” idea.

These are all strong, positive reasons for communications ideas. They give evidence to the power of relevant and, yes, clever, ideas. But what happens when a brand’s communications **don’t** have an idea? What are some of the negative outcomes...or, at least, the missed opportunities?

When a brand's communications don't have an idea...

- **They become like Radisson Hotel wallpaper**—something that almost no one notices and even fewer remember. This wallpaper-effect is especially prevalent among brands that use printed materials, like magazines, professional journals, and selling brochures (media that tend to be static—at least broadcast and internet media have some motion that may catch the eye). When there is no idea in these kinds of media, it is easy to see because what brands fall back on, in lieu of an idea, is almost always the same: a smiling face, a happy or “cured” patient, an enormous product-package shot, or a “branding scheme” of certain colors (usually the same as those in the brand’s logo) and a prescribed layout—like the repetitive use of a brand-name billboard across the top or bottom of the page. In some categories, brand’s consciously *avoid* ideas in favor of these branding schemes: you’ll often hear skincare or cosmetic marketers insisting that their colors and layout are distinctive, even owned by their brand...and that consumers need to see these same visual cues week-after-week, year-after-year in the magazine to be able to find the brand. But anyone who browses through a leading fashion magazine will quickly find that, honestly, most branding schemes look a lot like everyone else’s. It’s a weak excuse for not having an idea.
- **They become like an attic in a Victorian home, loaded with junk**—after all, when there is no idea to occupy the space, there is suddenly a lot of space to fill. You see this a lot in brochures because “we have (paid for) the space, let’s use as much of it as we can.” So where there might have been a striking metaphor or visual pun that delivers the brand’s benefit, instead there sits an intricately detailed graph or listing of bullet-point product features (some not even related to the brand’s benefit). Again, though, there are some brands who consciously *avoid* ideas in favor of information overload. A good many of these brands are pharmaceutical whose marketers insist the brochure or detail aid must enable the Sales Rep to provide the doctor with the important scientific information or to answer data-related questions. Back in the days when drug Sales Reps actually spent time with doctors, you have to wonder how many of these same-same, overloaded brochures they saw in a given day or week...and of those, how many they really recalled.

- **They become like a plane flying “straight & level”:** instantly vulnerable to enemy **attack**—which, as all fighter pilots know, happens when an aircraft flies in a continuous and obvious way. Nothing makes a an easier target to shoot at than an airplane that is not maneuvering; on the other hand, nothing is harder to hit than an airplane doing unexpected dogfight maneuvers: 90 degree turns, loops, deep dives, and so on. Think about it. In so many categories where products perform at about the same level and make similar claims (even claims that many might notice—like, “Removes 50% body fat in two weeks!”), the brand without an idea is “flying straight & level,” making it an easy target for a brand *with* an idea. Looking back on Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty,” you can see this very principle in action. Dove’s basic beauty products perform no better than Nivea’s or Olay’s or L’Oreal’s; some might say that some Dove products performed even below those of these other leading brands. Yet, where did the Dove Brand source its incremental share from during the idea’s 3-year heyday?
- **They never really find out “how high is up”**—meaning that having an idea, *in addition* to a meaningful and differentiated benefit can take a brand to levels of growth it never imagined. We’ll often hear marketers in some drug classes say, “My product provides such a dramatic reduction that all we really need to do is get the news out...and doctors write prescriptions on the spot.” That’s sometimes the case. There are certain ailments or conditions so problematic that it only takes an “announcement” (with the corresponding proof of claim) to get volume soaring. Look how quickly Lipitor added the billions in volume by merely presenting their large drops in total cholesterol triglycerides, and LDL. But how much more volume might there have been if that news was communicated in a compelling, capture-one’s-imagination idea? More of than not, having a good communications idea takes a brand to even greater heights.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

1. Start today, along with your various creative agencies, to make a commitment to developing Campaign Ideas for your brand’s communications—whatever media form they may take. To bring the commitment to life, schedule an informal Campaign Idea

meeting within the first 2-3 weeks of creative development. At that time, request that the agency show a number of ideas against your Communication Strategy. If nothing else, ask to be invited to your agency's internal idea meetings (you know, the ones they always have but never invite you to).

2. Create a "wall" of printed communications, comprising brands within your category or class as well as brands in related ones. Then, set up an Idea Assessment session in which you and your agency colleagues assess which brands on the wall have an idea and which do not.
3. With the same team, try to articulate what distinguishes a communication idea from mere communication information. See if you can set some basic criteria that everyone should expect from the former. (For example, one of our favorite longtime Creative Heads says that to qualify as an idea, there must be a "twist" present—something unexpected or out-of-norm. His agency even took the trouble to classify various kinds of twists...like the "ambush," and the "snowball.")
4. Will having an idea in your communications guarantee better results? No, not necessarily; it may not be a very good idea. But the odds of getting good ideas get a whole lot better when the team has already developed the habit of expecting an idea every time!

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