

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

Sunday, June 12, 2011

WHY YOUR COMMUNICATIONS SUCK – PART 1

Suck (suk) verb. Be very bad

During one of our Leadership Communications workshops a participant shared that his team tested their communications and found that it did poorly in convincing the target-customers to take action. As a result, he erroneously came to the conclusion that since his communications did not work then, ergo, marketing communications (as in advertising) does not work. Very interesting since there is ample evidence to suggest that, regardless of the category, effective communications can drive sales, and even work wonders in building brand equity.

This participant jutted his chin and threw out a challenge, which he disguised in the form of this question, “*Can you tell me why my communications don’t work?*” I responded, “*Yes, of course. Your marketing communications suck.*” His communications were terrible. But this is not an indictment against this marketer, or his communications. Instead, it’s the norm. Doubt us. Spend an evening watching television (for the commercials), leafing through magazines or journals (for the ads), clicking on banner ads, visiting websites, spending time on a brand page in Facebook, opening an email solicitation, reviewing detail aids, etc. There is a vast wasteland out there, regardless of the medium, filled with marketing communications that suck big time.

Why do the communications suck? This is not about communication vehicles (as in media selection). This is about process. This is about strategic content. This is about execution. This is about being able to assess communications and provide sound direction that adds to the productivity of the messaging. This is about marketers knowing how communications work and knowing what the hell they are doing. It’s all rather simple, but not easy.

How Communications Work

Let’s start with how communications do not work. Marketers, agency creative directors and sales personnel cannot develop communications to grow sales 10% or increase market share by 1.5-points. It just doesn’t work that way because there is no clear strategic focus, as in winning minds and hearts of target-customers, for the messaging.

Then how do communications work to enhance sales? Communications are about stimulating a specific behavior (the Communication Behavior Objective) for a targeted-customer. In order to stimulate the behavior the communication must first instill a belief (the “Key Thought”). The agency, creative resource team, or sales rep, in turn develops the execution (Campaign Idea), which is the stimulus, needed to instill the Key Thought in a way that connects (on an emotional level) with the targeted-customer. This in turn stimulates the behavior to achieve the Communication Behavior Objective, which drives sales and market share growth.

The Essential Elements of Effective Communications

Now that you understand how communications work it's time to tackle how to make your communications more productive. Let's start with the essential elements. These are:

- The creative brief to provide the strategic direction for messaging;
- The Campaign Idea to dramatize the strategic messaging in compelling customer language;
- Execution to cut through the clutter to be noticed, showcase the Campaign Idea and establish brand linkage;
- Skillful means in assessing and coaching the creative team to make the work more productive; and
- A quality process to efficiently and effectively leverage resources.

This DISPATCHES' article will address the creative brief. Subsequent DISPATCHES will address the other essential elements.

The Essential Creative Brief

This provides the direction for the messaging the creative resource team will use to develop the Campaign Idea needed to stimulate the behaviors of the targeted-customers that will contribute to the achievement of the Business Objectives (sales, market share and profits). It must contain all the essential information, and nothing more. It demonstrates a well-chosen target-customer, clear intent regarding the behavior that is needed, a legitimate and productive customer insight, a relevant and meaningfully differentiated Key Thought (which some would say is the benefit, promise or belief), and credibility in the form of convincing reason-why support.

This is the first step. It lays-out the assignment. It is a step that requires marketers and their creative resource partners to approach collaboratively to dialogue and address strategic issues in a thoughtful manner. It's about determining the appropriate strategic message for a select segment of target-customers, based upon a legitimate and productive customer insight to stimulate the achievement of a pre-determined behavior.

Many creative briefs are not worth the paper upon which they are written. This is not merely our opinion. It is a common complaint among senior marketers and agency personnel. Creative briefs suck for any one, usually more (much more), of the following reasons:

- There is no "one" standard creative brief. Just about every brand within a company has different brief, which makes it difficult for senior managers to address content. It would be akin to using different financial accounting and reporting systems for different brands. It doesn't facilitate strategic dialogue.
- Essential elements are missing from the creative brief. It does not contain one, or more, of the essential elements needed to appropriately direct creative development.
- It contains elements that are non-essential to the task at hand of developing leadership communications. What's wrong with this? Pure and simple it dilutes focus from time spent on what is truly important and meaningful.
- The target-customer definition is superficial, incomplete (such as relying on demographics), lacks clarity (words are imprecise), is not real (as it doesn't reflect the actual customer) or is not choiceful (no segmentation and resultant targeting). In practice, marketers resist making choices trying to reach everyone, which results in a Key Thought that either lacks focus or is generic. Regardless, it is difficult, if not impossible to discovering a legitimate and productive customer insight and developing a strategically compelling Key Thought.
- The stated reason or objective of the communication is not a behavior. "Awareness" and "trial" are not communication behavior objectives. Awareness is a media objective. Trial is a promotion objective. We need target-customers to adopt something they have not done, or don't do, or to

switch from what they are using to our offering, or use our product more often. These are behaviors. They each require very different Key Thoughts to be planted in the target-customers' consciousness.

- The behavior objective is not SMART (as in specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to achieving the Business Objectives, and time bound). The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of the communications is whether it drives sales in the marketplace. We need to identify what we expect so that we can measure (i.e., inspect) for it. It also serves to make clear the task of the communications.
- What customer insight? Oh, yes, something may be written in the section of the creative brief entitled "customer insights," but these cannot be called insightful. It is amazing what passes for customer insights. They are neither legitimate (as in being a real or perceived weakness of the competition, an attitudinal barrier that needs to be overcome, or an untapped, compelling belief) and/or productive (as in the brand's ability to exploit it). They tend to be rationalizations contributing to the illusion that the creative brief is meaningful.
- The Key Thought is not relevant to the target-customer or meaningfully differentiated from competition. There is no point-of-difference versus the competition. They promise generic or category benefits.
- There are too many benefits in the Key Thought. This would include generic benefits, handling of objections, etc., which obfuscate any meaningful differentiation. Additionally, this serves as a barrier to developing a Campaign Idea and/or cutting through to the target-customer.
- The Key Thought contains features instead of benefits. Remember, customers don't buy a 1/8-inch drill bit. Instead, they buy a 1/8-inch hole or better yet a bookshelf hanging in the family room.
- The Key Thought is a meaningless emotional benefit, like "get your life back." Yeah, right. (By the way, where did it go?)
- The creative brief is not single-minded. The "strategic triangle" of target-customer needs, customer insight and Key Thought are not cohesive. Each points in a different direction with no clear focus for communication development or assessment. So instead of having a dialogue around the creative work there is endless discussion about the strategy.
- The reason-why support is not factual. Or it is not compelling. Or it is generic. Take your pick.
- The reason-why may not link to and, as such, payoff the benefit to make the Key Thought believable and more persuasive.
- The brand character, or personality of the brand, is about the target as opposed to a badge or relationship of the brand bundle to the target.
- The brand character is articulated using the same collection of adjectives that everyone uses such as "leader, modern, caring, trustworthy, authority" (sound familiar?).
- It contains creativity-sapping, idea-undermining, dogma-perpetuating "executorial mandates." Has anyone held these-up to thoughtful analysis? And, with all the mandates why would marketers need creative resources? They can develop their own executions. The executorial mandates do not leverage creative talent. They devalue it.
- It is not prepared in collaboration with those that are tasked with developing the creative to execute the strategy (whether that be the agency team, sales personnel, internal creative resources). Instead, one side develops and shares it with the other and it gets slapped about like a ping-pong ball at a tournament. There is little meaningful strategic dialogue or understanding.
- The marketers preparing it have little experience with developing or managing communications. So, they are lacking in technical and/or strategic thinking skills.
- Their senior managers do not provide the mature, experienced supervision needed to improve the productivity of the work. Adult supervision (leadership) is absent.
- There is no real appreciation for the importance of the creative brief. It is merely a process starter. So, not much time goes into it before the agency is given the "green light" to proceed with creative development. And, when creative development begins the meter starts running. It eats up

funding, and morale. It stacks-up significant opportunity losses that are real despite that few marketers, or their organizations, are measuring or acknowledging these losses.

- Those senior client managers responsible for approving the communications, and those creative team managers responsible for delivering it, do not acknowledge their agreement to the creative brief with their signature. This is essential to gaining commitment to execute against the creative brief.
- The agency does not push back against what they feel is not appropriate (e.g., too many benefits in the Key Thought). They (meekly?) accept the client's lack of direction. They talk about the client's failings but do little to address them directly.
- The agency or creative resource personnel do not treat the client brief seriously. Instead of engaging in a meaningful strategic dialogue they accept the client brief and rely on creating their own internal agency creative brief. Now there are two (or "dueling") briefs. There are two sets of direction.
- There is no standard for assessing the creative brief. It's all about "opinion" as opposed to objectifying subjective judgment based upon sound principles and best practices.

What can go wrong will go wrong, if we are not applying all our knowledge and skill in managing the development of the creative brief. No wonder that our communications suck. Our creative briefs suck, big time.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

Clearly, we do not want our communications to suck. Who goes to work saying, "I want to do suck work today?" No one we know and probably no one you know either. We want our work to shine. But there are a host of factors that get in the way of our doing our best work and, instead, contribute to doing work that sucks. But we can't pass the blame. We can't make excuses. That will not produce excellence. Instead, we have to take responsibility for our actions and strive to do the right things in the right way. Here are some "Boats & Helicopters" for you to consider adopting in order to produce creative briefs that will contribute to the development of leadership communications:

- 1) ***Start at the beginning*** – We've identified some 25-factors that undermine our ability to produce excellence, and contribute to the development of a creative brief that sucks. Start by reviewing this listing with an eye towards which of these are sabotaging your ability to develop a productive creative brief. Better yet, share these with your team (resource team included!) to pinpoint those that you need to remedy. But don't try to do it all in one go. Perhaps, you might want to start by working collaboratively with your creative resource team. Get on the same page regarding how communications work. Then identify what elements should be included in the Essential Creative Brief, and what elements should be omitted because they are not critical to developing leadership advertising. Proceed to address those factors that you believe will have the greatest impact on improving the productivity of your creative brief.
- 2) ***Deepen your learning*** – We've published a 4-part series previously in DISPATCHES titled, "How to Develop a More Productive Creative Brief." These can be found at the following addresses:
 - Part 1: <http://www.bdn-intl.com/DevMoreProductiveCB-1.php>
 - Part 2: <http://www.bdn-intl.com/DevMoreProductiveCB2.php>
 - Part 3: <http://www.bdn-intl.com/DevMoreProductiveCB-Part3.php>
 - Part 4: <http://www.bdn-intl.com/DevMoreProductiveCB4.php>

Also, contact us if you are interested in BDNI conducting a Creative Brief workshop with your team, or participating in our Leadership Communications seminar where we provide instruction on developing the Essential Creative Brief.

- 3) ***Get expert coaching on your creative brief*** – Take advantage of a new BDNI service, CB Coach. We will assess your creative brief and provide specific direction on ways to make it more productive. If you are interested reply to this DISPATCHES or call Richard Czerniawski at 847 256-8820 for details.

Let's get to work on developing leadership communications, not communications that suck!

Richard Czerniawski and Mike Maloney

Richard Czerniawski

.....
430 Abbotsford Road
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043
tel 847.256.8820
fax 847.256.8847
.....

reply to Richard:
rdczerniawski@cs.com or
richardcz@bdn-intl.com

Mike Maloney

.....
1506 West 13th Street, #17
Austin, Texas 78703
tel 512.236.0971
fax 512.236.0972
.....

reply to Mike:
mikewmaloney@gmail.com or
mwm@bdn-intl.com

Special Notice: The second half of the year is rapidly filling up for BDNI causing us to wonder if we should reconsider conducting our annual “Open Program” currently scheduled for November 15-17, 2011 in Chicago. If you are interested in attending this program, please alert Lori Vandervoort at lorivan@bdn-intl.com or call 800-255-9831 (620-431-0780). If there is sufficient need for this training, we will certainly conduct it. Thank you.

