

# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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## YOU CAN TELL A LOT...FROM WHAT'S MISSING

Show a group of marketers a communication from a brand they don't work on (or, better yet, a brand they know little about) and then ask them "What do you think of this communication?" Since most good marketers aren't shy and usually have a point-of-view, you'll likely get a good number of responses—most of them pretty negative ones. To illustrate this, consider the following instance:

We recently showed a group of about 25 medical device marketers a two-page print ad from a medical journal, one that would be read only by surgeons. This particular print ad featured an unusual color visual of an excessively obese woman following bariatric surgery—that procedure that typically uses gastric banding to reduce the size of one's stomach—and she was standing against a background of desert sand dunes. The woman's body was viewed from behind, not in any offensive way, and showed the natural hanging folds of skin that result from significant weight loss. The headline for the print ad read as follows: "The terrain can be unfamiliar. Don't go it alone." As you can probably imagine, then, this was a communication for would-be surgeons of "body-sculpting," a relatively new practice. The brand sponsoring the communication was a relatively well-known one in the suture business.

Without explaining any more in background than that the communication was placed in medical journals by a brand in the post-bariatric surgery suture business, we asked these 25 marketers (none of whom was familiar with the brand or with the business), "What do you think of this communication?" Here's a representation of most of the comments:

*"There isn't sufficient information here about the brand's features or benefits? How will the target know what this brand is promising?"*

*"With no data included, this seems more like a consumer communication."*

*"The target isn't really clear—surgeons I know wouldn't get it. Why don't they show a typical target body-sculpting surgeon, say, in the operating theater?"*

*"What's the deal with the sand dune thing; it isn't relevant to most doctors."*

*"Where's the detailed call to action?"*

As you can see, this communication wasn't very well-received, or appreciated. You might argue, in defense of comments like these, "To be fair, the marketers weren't provided with much background." But it seems to us that, as curious, disciplined marketers, instead of reacting in the

more predictable way to something we're seeing for the very first time (you know the way we mean, "I wouldn't have done it that way"), we ought to be asking ourselves, right away, "I wonder why they—the brand marketers and their communication agencies—did it this way? Honestly, what we have found is that, more often than not, there are good strategic reasons for executing a communication in a certain way. More to the point, we have found that you can tell a great deal by *what's missing*.

Let's go back to these few comments made by our medical device marketers...and take a closer look at what's missing, and why it may be missing:

--"*There isn't sufficient information here about the brand's features and benefits.*" So, why wouldn't there be such information? After all, the brand paid for a two-page print ad, so surely there was plenty of space to say more? The most likely reasons that more is not being said are these: (a) the *behavior* the brand team is seeking is to get instant readership, followed by a website visit or a sales rep call where more information can then be easily provided; (b) too much information here virtually prevents the instant readership the brand wants.

--"*With no data included, this seems like a consumer communication.*" A strange comment, for sure, since our medical device marketers were clearly informed that the communication was placed in medical journals...periodicals that consumer-patients would almost never see. But you can read into this comment what's really troubling the marketer who made it: normally, communications to doctors include the compelling data to support the brand's efficacy benefits. This communication, however, contains **no** specific efficacy benefits, as noted above. Hence, the data is purposefully missing. One other thing: the likely reason that the "look" of the execution is more consumer-like (instead of clinical-study-like) is that the brand and their agency desperately wants to stand out from the crowd of usual brand communications within the journal.

--"*Why don't they show a typical body-sculpting surgeon, say, in the operating theater?*" If the team consciously chose **not** to show the expected, current practitioner of body-sculpting it is surely because this is NOT their intended target. What the brand is trying to do here is to *grow the body-sculpting suture category* by attracting new and low-experienced body-sculpting surgeons—to learn more, build their confidence, and gain significantly more procedures going forward.

--"*What's the deal with the sand dune thing—it isn't relevant to most doctors.*" In other words, where's the golf course visual, right? Golf **is** more relevant to more doctors to be sure. Truth is, there are so many ways to be relevant to a given target, and many of those are not merely the expected approaches. Obviously, like much of medical journal communications, the idea behind this one is a metaphor. And the best metaphors work like "visual shorthand," a quick and easy connection between the two things being compared. In this case, actually, it's true that most doctors would perceive deserts and sand dunes as "unfamiliar terrain." That's the required point for new body-sculpting surgeons: just as sand dunes represent unfamiliar terrain to them, so do the contours of a post-bariatric-surgery patient.

--"*Where's the detailed call to action?*" Okay, to be fair, perhaps the brand team actually did overlook or "miss" an important addition to the communication. Upon closer examination of the ad, there is website and sales rep calling information, but it's in the smaller-typeface body paragraph. And since the inferred, behavioral purpose of the communication is to drive surgeons to follow-up for more information it might well be more obviously placed within the ad.

But, hopefully, you can see from this one rather typical communication assessment, the value in “flipping” our usual, critical perspective from “I wouldn’t have done it that way,” to “I wonder why they did it that way?” An even more important learning from this one, though, is the value in appreciating *what’s missing*.

**BOATS & HELICOPTERS:**

1. Speaking of *what’s missing*, there can be no better advice when it comes to developing effective communications (you know, effective as in delivering the target-behavior your brand requires) than to limit what’s being included in the communication to **only** the information needed to achieve the desired behavior.
2. Along these same lines, we recommend the following practices: (a) each time someone on the team suggests (or commands!) the addition of something to a communication, ask the question, “And by adding this, we will improve overall effectiveness how, exactly?” and (b) when the team is convinced the communication is finished, go back and “force edit” out a few more things.
3. Make it an on-going practice, when working with your communication agencies, to assess communications *outside* your immediate category or class...and start by trying to determine why the marketers of these brands did what they did.

Richard Czerniawski & Mike Maloney

**Richard Czerniawski**

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

reply to Richard:  
[rdczerniawski@cs.com](mailto:rdczerniawski@cs.com) or  
[richardcz@bdn-intl.com](mailto: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](mailto:mikewmaloney@gmail.com) or  
[mwm@bdn-intl.com](mailto:mwm@bdn-intl.com)

