

Basis of a successful communications program

By Jan Hedquist/ SCORE Counselor/Workshop Presenter

Whether in the consumer or business to business marketing wars successfully communicating a product or service's benefits has never been more important. The "average" American can be exposed to as many as ten thousand commercial messages a day. That comes to more than 600 messages an hour during a 16-hour day! For all we know some of these may be repeated in our dreams as well.....

As these battles intensify, more and more companies and firms in virtually every category have come to the realization that mass communications are critical to their success and growth. However, amazingly enough people who would no more engage in a discipline in which they are not familiar become instant communications experts. After all, a PC or Mac with word processing and maybe a graphics program is all that's necessary! In the advertising and marketing business this is called the "Alice in Wonderland" syndrome of "when you don't know where you're going you may end up somewhere else". Thus enormous efforts and large sums of money is spent on ineffective and frequently pedestrian advertising and public relations programs.

Creating successful communications demands a fair amount of experience and talent but there are a number of fundamental rules that apply. You would not venture to construct a building without a blueprint and successful, breakthrough and successful advertising and public relations cannot be created without a similar blueprint or strategy.

How to develop the best strategy: It's deceptively simple! It only demands a great deal of discipline and perseverance. No crystal ball, no black box, no magic, merely hard work and lots of thinking. Typically, in most organizations it starts with the product or service. And that is where the problems start. Over the years, experience has pointed out that any strategic thinking must begin with the customer for without him/her there is no market and therefore no sales. Therefore to prepare a strategy which is 99% on target there are four deceptively easy questions that need answering beginning with:

1. Who is your customer?
2. What is your customer's biggest problem?
3. How does your offering solve the customer's problem?
4. Where will your business come from?

Who is your customer? "For every product or service, there exists a relatively small group of people who consume a disproportionate amount of a given product or service". The famous 80/20 rule holds true in most cases: 80% of a product or service is consumed by 20% of potential users. Critical to a successful strategy is a thorough, in-depth knowledge of this group from as many perspectives as possible.

What is your customer's problem? The next step, once the customer clearly identified is to pinpoint his/her problem with the category. Within any given category people are much better at complaining and finding faults than they are hailing its attributes. Think about it, complaining comes a lot easier than expressing joy and satisfaction: it's simply human nature. In fact people are extremely articulate and creative when expressing dissatisfaction. Generally problems tend to fall in one of three categories, PRICE, PERFORMANCE or PERCEPTION. And since people are disposed to go to almost any length to avoid a problem they are also prepared to pay a premium to not having to deal with it. Pain avoidance is one of the most powerful and persuasive sales tools availability.

How does your product and service solve the customer's problem? Only once we know exactly who the customer is and what his/her problems are should we evaluate how our product or service can provide a meaningful and persuasive way of providing a solution. This means looking at the product/service from the customer's perspective.

Where will your business come from? Since the customer's purse or budget tends to be fixed your product/service if successful will be taking business away from someone else or it will preempt a sale or purchasing decision from taking place in someone else's favor. A thorough understanding of your product/service's competition is a must to determine exactly where your business will come from AND what your competitors may do to protect their business.

By putting the customer first and the product/service last the chances for success are increased many times.

Once this strategy finalized it will need to come alive though exiting, meaningful and memorable executions through all forms of media.

We will examine how to approach the creative aspects of executing the strategy at SCORE Central PA's October's Beyond the Basics Workshop.

About the Presenter: Jan Hedquist is a counselor with Score Central PA and SCORE San Francisco. He was a Vice President with BBDO New York, General Manager of BBDO Latin America, President of Ketchum Advertising Worldwide and Vice Chairman of Young & Rubicam Europe.

SCORE Central PA's Business Improvement Workshop—Beyond the Basics
“Advertising and Marketing—Basis of a Successful Communication Program”
October 18, 2011, 9:30am-Noon, Nittany Bank, 2541 East College Avenue, State College PA, near the Nittany Mall. Register on line at
<http://www.scorecpa.org/beyondthebasicsworkshopregistration.html>
Cost of workshop \$30.00 for pre-registered non-SCORE Clients - \$40.00 after deadline or at the door. FREE to SCORE Clients.