



Marketing: Brand Aid

Saturday, 01 March 2008

We've rounded up a group of experts to explain how better brand research can boost your next product launch.

Brand research can't guarantee success, but it's money well spent if you can tilt the odds in your favor, says Jack Gordon of AcuPoll Research. "The consumer packaged goods industry has been on the forefront of brand research, and the failure rate for new products in that industry is 75% to 90%," said Gordon, CEO of the Cincinnati-based consumer research company. "If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say for companies that don't do research, that figure is closer to 90%."

Even for companies that sell a service instead of a product, brand research is vital to determine market opportunities, identify potential challenges, and craft a value proposition. But true research consists of more than merely writing a mission statement or releasing a product while hoping for the best, said Rosemary Breehl, founder and president of Breehl, Traynor & Zehe, a brand development and communications development firm based in Cleveland.

"Your brand is your claim of distinction, who you are, and what you bring to the marketplace," said Breehl. "The research portion is extremely important. Our process involves establishing the brand essence of a company and what it can claim as a unique distinction. The brand is developed as a corporate initiative, not a marketing initiative. After a company decides who and what it is, then it must find out if that brand resonates with the target audience."

Brand specialists certified through The Brand Establishment, where Breehl and partner Tom Traynor are managing partners, use a methodology called Turning the Telescope to help companies determine their missions. Breehl explained that many companies will turn an imaginary telescope on their target audience, collect data, and deliver that to a marketing firm.

The fallacy in that approach is that competitors are doing the same thing, which can create a situation where commodity pricing rules. Turning the Telescope allows for introspection, examining the company, its history, products, people, and culture to uncover a company's distinctive brand identity.

"As consumers, we love it when companies tell us what they are and what they do," said Breehl. Wal-Mart and Target occupy the same market, for example, but while Wal-Mart focuses on low prices, Target's message is more fashion-forward. It may not have the lowest prices, but Target has positioned itself slightly up-market from Wal-Mart, creating an important area of distinction between the mass merchants.

Stop. Think.

Breehl and Michael Volpatt, partner at New York-based Larkin/Volpatt Communications, both espouse the importance of brand research before any messaging can take place.

Volpatt put it simply: "Think before you do anything. The minute you step out the door with a message, you're committing yourself to something." That message can't be plucked out of thin air. It must be accurate and defensible, Volpatt said. If your product is the only one on the market that has a particular feature, mention that. If it is the market leader in some segment, mention that also.

After examining the competitive landscape and crafting a message, Volpatt suggests holding focus groups, conducting surveys, and talking to clients, potential clients, and employees about the message to determine whether it hits the target audience.

To achieve maximum effectiveness, brand strategy and messaging must precede any public relations and advertising efforts. While advertising efforts can be quantified with a high degree of accuracy, branding and public relations are more nebulous in terms of return on investment. However, the three go hand in hand to develop perceptions about a company, product, or service.

Collaboration and research proved vital to the successful launch of Travelocity's gnome mascot in early 2004, said Mary Kate Smither, account director at Dallas-based Vollmer Public Relations. Prior to the launch, brand and research communications firm Hall & Partners conducted a competitive analysis to establish the brand character to communicate the online travel company's message in a way that connected with the audience.

Ad agency McKinney+Silver then designed a "missing gnome" poster describing the gnome's kidnapping from his fictional owner, Bill. The posters, which featured the gnome's photo, a toll-free tip line, and a missing gnome Web site, were distributed to key media and consumer markets.

Vollmer's contribution included seeding Internet message boards and mailing more than 2,500 handwritten letters on Bill's behalf, asking reporters for help in securing the gnome's safe return. The work garnered more than 100 media placements, more than 35 million impressions, and about \$1.6 million in publicity value. The campaign also resulted in more than 140,000 calls to the tip line and more than 300,000 unique visitors to the Web site.

Stay in proportion

The consumer packaged goods industry does a great job of research, and marketing folks from those companies are migrating to firms in other industries, bringing the research mantra with them, noted Gordon from AcuPoll, the consumer research company that since 1991 has tested 35,000 potential new products.

"Quantitative research betters your chance of success in the market," Gordon said. "It's important to get the idea right and then deliver a product that capitalizes on that great idea." He's not a proponent of focus groups and notes that leaps in quantitative research over the past 15 years have made it more valuable to a wide range of companies.

Gordon said that retailers such as Wal-Mart, Best Buy, and Giant Eagle that are conducting significant amounts of research compete more effectively. The amount of money a company should spend researching a product, service, or idea should be in proportion to its estimated value. Spending \$50,000 researching an idea with an expected worth of \$5 million would be money well spent, Gordon noted.

"Good brand development and research are investments in the company," said Breehl from Breehl, Traynor & Zehe. "You can't track too many variables. Good research can distill down the number of variables to the most important ones."

*Matt Bolch, mbolch@mindspring.com,
is a freelance writer based in Atlanta.*