

TOM

Ball of Brand Confusion

ASACKER

“Perfection of means and confusion of ends seem to characterize our age.”

- Albert Einstein

We are presently witnessing an unprecedented drive for perfection in the field of marketing. Each and every day a plethora of new emails, articles, case studies and blogs promise to help us optimize everything from search engine rankings and viral video awareness to ad campaign engagement and direct mail response rates. Business books are popping up like weeds in a field (more than twenty new titles each day) expounding on how to be authentic, influence through social networks, create compelling blogs, spread sticky messages, and tell persuasive stories. There's only one problem: Trying to perfect this growing assortment of marketing means is causing brand confusion, and thus a negative effect on the enterprise ends.

The end, the goal, of any organization, of any brand, is to create customers (or clients, users, members, donors, fans, etc.), and you accomplish that goal by continually innovating to add value to their lives. Everything the organization invests in, and works on, should be laser focused to that end. That may sound ridiculously evident, but I can assure you that it's not. For example, ZenithOptimedia predicts that worldwide advertising expenditures will grow by a little over 6% this year to a whopping \$473 billion! That's not to say that *all* advertising is valueless in the eyes of customers. But I can assure you that most of that \$473 billion is worse than valueless; it's a drain on people's time, attention, and sensibilities.

The Invisible Cognitive Force

So why do they persist? Why do marketers continue to fritter away their organizations' valuable time, attention and money trying to keep up with, and optimize, activities that most customers find little, if any, value in? And I'm not referring simply to advertising: I'd toss most direct mail, sales calls, brochures, "branding" projects, and pr in the heap as well. What keeps people grounded to their outdated mode of thinking about marketing and branding; thinking that creates nothing but inertia, waste and confusion? I believe that I may have finally figured it out, and it's so simple that it makes me wonder why I didn't pick it up sooner.

It became apparent to me during a recent conversation with a passionate, yet utterly confused, executive about what marketing "means" to employ to achieve her particular business "ends." See if you can pick it up: "*So, here's my most confounding question,*" she began. "*What message should we create to influence potential customers, and what are the best vehicles to use to deliver that message? What works today?*" There it is! Do you see it? It's staring you right in the face! But, much like fish are unaware of the water in which they live, you're probably

completely unaware of it. It's as omnipresent and invisible as gravity, and just as powerful in keeping organizations bound to *their* great big balls of brand confusion.

Last week, AdAge revealed the invisible force in a 1,352-word marketing exhortation by the venerable marketing pundit Al Ries; an article that is all about the strategic imperative of slogans. Here are a few pieces of wisdom from the article: "*If you want an effective, long-term rallying cry for your brand, you need a slogan that sticks in the mind. A sticky slogan can live forever.*" And, "*A sticky slogan is only half the battle. If you want your marketing program to be exceptionally effective, your slogan should contain words consumers can use to pass along your brand's message.*" There it is again. Do you see it now?

Marketing's Elephant

Okay, here's the elephant in marketing's cluttered and chaotic room: Marketers are obsessed with words. They believe that they are in the communication and persuasion business. They incorrectly compare the marketing of products and services in a supersaturated marketplace to marketing a political candidate or making a legal case, where ambivalent people are *forced* to choose between only *two* alternatives. This worldview has them fixated on doing things right —right message, right medium, right slogan, right tagline, et al.—blinding them to the most important marketing question: Are we doing the *right* things? Message to most marketers (I know, quite ironic): You are not.

Don't take my word for it: Simply take a clear-eyed look at some of today's most successful and talked about brands. What are Nintendo and Harley-Davidson's slogans? Why doesn't Apple cover their packaging with persuasive copy? Are Stonyfield Farm's yogurt customers engaged with its advertising, or with its all natural and organic ingredients? Did Toyota owners buy their vehicles because they wanted to "move forward?" Is that what caused the company to surpass GM in worldwide sales? Puh-lease. I own two Toyotas and I had to reach out to Google to discover that banal slogan. And speaking of Google, where the heck is their tagline anyway?

Now, if you're in the words business, please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that words are unimportant. They can definitely add value when the strategic *intent* is to add value with words, and not merely to cajole, convince, or, heaven forbid, hypnotize people. But marketers? Untether your minds. You are *not* in the words business; you're in the business of adding value to customers' lives. Resist the cognitive pull of communication and persuasion on your strategic thinking and follow the advice of one of the greatest marketers of all time, The King: "*Close your mouth and open up your heart and satisfy me. Satisfy me baby.*"

© 2008 Tom Asacker

Tom Asacker writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for marketplace success in chaotic times. He is a brand adviser and author of critically acclaimed books including *Sandbox Wisdom* and his latest, *A Clear Eye for Branding*. Visit www.acleareye.com to learn more.