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How to Make Your Company Stand Out in a World of Blind and Deaf Prospects

Contemporary consumers... We are a tough crowd. You and I live in a world where our eyes don't see and our ears don't hear. We are at once interested in what is new and yet detached from broadly cast communication – eager to see, but blind to white noise and hype. Where the thought of parting with our money is concerned, we just don't care much about new promises perceived to be remarkably similar to old information. Too much of it exists to lend fidelity to all of it, so very little of it passes muster.

Despite these seemingly obvious truths, marketers who really *get it* are the minority. Not surprising, they are often category leaders as well. To these few, marketing excellence equates to compassion and empathy. They identify with their prospects and recognize key aspects of personal motivation. These marketers have mastered Recognology®. You can too.

Within most industries, at least those that I have encountered during two decades of advising marketers, everything continues as it always has. Messaging within industry groups remains cohesive, complacent and almost collaborative among competitors. Industry participants cluster together around common-denominator identities, so much so, that names and logos might be easily exchanged from one company to the next, without disturbing consumer perceptions.

That the identity of companies comprising our consumerized landscape appears as a homogenous blur is no coincidence. There is comfort in a crowd of one's peers. No one is at risk. Solace and safety reside in numbers. How

often I have listened to a marketing director say, "We want to appear different, but not *that* different." Indeed, the localized coalescence of virtually every industry's almost default messaging largely mitigates its influence and therein rests the irony: Marketing, as it now so often exists, disaffects prospects to the extent that it actually prevents behavioral change.

Think about it: The once influential, socio-economic psychology that predictably motivated purchasing decisions now alienates consumers. Despite the fact that the present generation of award-winning marketing is innovative – dare I say, incredible – little about it is actually influential. With skins of weathered leather and knee jerk evaluations, we reject far more information than we willingly receive. Despite the full functionality of our senses, for the average marketer, the odds of successfully penetrating our sophisticated consumer defenses are not good. As *professional* consumers, our psychological defenses and sales-survival skills are refined, fully functional and continually updated. The average purveyor of goods and services doesn't stand a chance, even though some of these same purveyors sometimes offer something we actually might want to buy.

The Fallacy in Relying on Saturation

For thirty years or more, purportedly savvy marketers have relied heavily on high intensity sensory saturation to push their wares through the marketplace. Since, at its core, marketing's goal is that of persuasion, marketers continually barrage us with sadly unconvincing salvos

aimed at eliciting our purchasing decision. Estimates vary, but statistics suggest that the average American consumer receives 300 to 1,500 marketing messages daily. Marketers want a response: *Buy my stuff.*

The net of this attack is something quite unexpected. Instead of trusting everything that marketers claim as truth and responding en masse, consumers politely smile, even laugh and then build higher barriers. When we do respond to marketing with a purchase decision, we are critically selective. Thus, at least for the marketer who fails to make the sale, the decision-demanding cycle begins again at an even more feverish pace. What is the typical marketer's reply to a failed strategy or to consumer resistance? "Just ratchet up the incredible one more notch-or-so... that should do it."

Think I'm exaggerating? Validate my claims yourself. Flip on your plasma screen and without much delay, you'll soon be entertained with groups of talking cows promoting California cheese, Aveeno's morphs of right-before-your eyes wrinkle removal, ducks screaming "Aflac" and annoying Verizon tech-reps traveling through the remote crevasses of our nation shouting, "Can you hear me now." *Entertainment* is the operative concept. Selling you something is the ultimate goal.

Does this stuff really happen? I mean really, how many of the cows that you know speak English? Does this new generation of messaging work? To be sure, it is clever and humorous – even memorable. However, would you buy California cheese because of what a cow says? Is it possible that marketing firms and ad agencies are too bent on theater and simultaneously absent from humanity?

Of course, you can attempt to turn off the barrage of

high-intensity marketing, but corporate America is everywhere you point your senses. It's hard to get away from it, except perhaps when you sleep and you can be sure that somewhere, some marketer is working on this problem. Who is to say we are not on the eve of lacing your Lunesta-induced dreams with purchase opportunities conveniently available just as soon as you awake and can reach for your credit card?

Perhaps the most blatant example of persuasion force-feeding is online. Jump on the Internet and you will quickly appreciate the necessity of pop-up blockers and spam filters. Have you checked your Outlook Inbox this morning? How many offers for Viagra did you receive... before your second cup of coffee? How many stock tips did you wade through before realizing that you are not part of a "select group of insightful, forward thinking investors?"

Technology is doubtless to blame. Having evolved into modern consumers, we have acclimated to very high levels of sensory inundation with equally high levels of discretion. No doubt, we expect a lot if we are to lend our attention. We are jaded and marketers know this. "No wow factor, no sale" goes the thinking. Many marketers conclude that, *If I fall below this seemingly invisible but very real threshold of stimulation, I'm doomed. Obviously, it all comes down to who can be most clever, most often, most everywhere.*

So, you might ask, *If this is true, how can I compete given such a limited window of consumer attention and the intense pitch of stimulation pervasive among contemporary consumers?* Surprisingly, you *can* compete. Following you will find several ideas that will help you contend more effectively while spending your marketing dollars more wisely.

Marketing the Right Sentiment versus Marketing More Stimulation

As you have read this article, perhaps you have noticed something about my writing style, particularly my voice... or maybe not. I have written this copy, selecting elements of language as one might control the inflection of one's voice. I have made every effort to include *you* as though we are conversing, sharing in a dialog. You may notice I refer to *you* frequently.

My reason for writing in this manner is simple: By doing so, I am actively soliciting your subliminal participation and assent to my thesis. With each use of a second person pronoun like *you*, I intentionally help you mentally participate in our discussion while I attempt to involve *you* with the point I wish to make. Together, our chat is not some distant, esoteric, *it happened to someone else* kind of a monologue. This dialogue we share is just between us, you and I.

Ah, you say... *so this is merely a literary manipulation*. No, it is not (well, okay... it could be but in our case, really it's not). Rather, my reason for writing *you* and *your* values into our discussion rests in my heartfelt desire to identify with you in ways that suggest I understand a little bit about you and your company's marketing problems. And don't you appreciate that? Suppose every marketer began their pitch with a brief summation of who they believed you to be, especially if they got it right. You might hear them out before throwing them out. You might really listen. Ultimately, you might buy.

This Just in...

Newsflash: There are practical limitations to the methods through which you can reach your prospects to elicit the

response you seek. As your own experience probably confirms, marketing's once rock-solid methodology of *content with frequency* simply does not work like it once did. Returns from this stalwart continue to diminish.

Truthfully, the majority of marketing strategies are not that new. Sure, contemporary marketers employ flash and sophistication across a variety of multi-channel venues, but look more deeply at content and you will likely agree: Most marketing tactics are recycled at best (they are irritating at worst.) More important, even the cleverest marketing efforts seldom disguise the underlying truth about marketing's fundamental purpose. In us-versus-them mentality, your prospects understand one thing for sure about your marketing strategy: You want to sell them something.

On the other side and as a marketer, you know that your prospects are moving targets toting hefty bags of preoccupation and skepticism. They have always been hard to reach. Save for the iPhone, with nothing new under the sun, it's just worse now. That is the reason you employ some kind of marketing strategy to begin with.

Agreement here begs the question: *How do you influence your prospects if cows don't speak English, theater alone doesn't work and everyone in your industry group – your company included – looks about the same to your average prospect?*

Here is the simple answer: *Build your marketing strategy and your corporate identity around values your prospects actually embrace*. Specifically, market yourself with a corporate storyline that makes your prospect feel understood. Tailor your messaging and your appearance to include them. Make your company's

identity part of their identity. Forget what you sell for a moment and look at life and values from your prospects' point of view. Start at the end.

The Differences Between You and Me-me-me.

Companies are a lot like people. They are born. They grow. They mature and sadly, sometimes they die. Like people, companies have perceived personalities. These personalities are more than merely a summation of management's guidance and employee attitudes. They go beyond the scope of product selection, revenues and market position. Interestingly and over time, companies acquire public personas by which their customers not uncommonly characterize in terms of friendship or disdain. Notwithstanding, some companies fail to recognize the influence they might wield on public perceptions. They settle for whatever consumers choose to believe about them.

Like me, you might have friends who describe shopping at Nordstrom with highly emotional expressions. Vickie, my wife, *loves* Nordstrom, as do most of the wives in our circle of friends. In fact, Vickie and the girls are so enthusiastic about the Nordstrom experience that, in marketing circles, we describe them as advocates.

Why would you advocate inanimate racks of expensive clothing and salespeople wanting to load you up on fashion while loading down your Nordstrom credit card? Sure, you can attribute the Nordstrom persona to a reputation of quality and service, but that's too easy a cop out. Target has demonstrably good quality and plenty of great service, yet it does not share in the cultic customer dedication that Nordstrom enjoys. For loyal Nordies, thoughts of Nordstrom include an endearing, almost human personality, a sort of corporate persona that tran-

sends the sum of its parts and promotes a living, intimate connection with its customers. By the way, just in case you are in a hurry to do the same with your company, consider this sobering thought: It has taken Nordstrom generations – more than a hundred years – to establish this mythical relationship. Your company probably needs something a bit-more immediate.

The Un-Nordstrom

Bloomingdale's has a corporate persona too. It is a persona quite different from that of Nordstrom, even though both companies cater to similar constituents, carry similar inventories and are often located in malls where you will find both retailers conveniently located. What do Nordie customers think about Bloomies? Bloomingdale's is perceived as uppity and snobbish. Don't even ask a Nordstrom customer to compare Bloomingdale's service. Nordies say that Bloomingdale's has an attitude and apparently, it is not one conducive to cult-like loyalty.

Years ago, the Wall Street Journal published an interview with a Bloomingdale's executive. The columnist asked the Bloomie exec his opinion about Nordstrom's plans to open a store in Manhattan, just up the street from Bloomingdale's. The question was a simple one: "What does Nordstrom's move to Manhattan mean to Bloomingdale's?" The exec's response was revealing. *I suppose this means we will have to start being nice to our customers* he replied.

Within the context of corporate personas – the manner in which audiences perceive a company – distinctions are visibly apparent. There are companies that communicate their self-centered, almost arrogant assessments of themselves and there are companies that communi-

cate how intimately they understand their customers. No doubt, your company is in one of these camps. How do your prospects perceive your corporate persona? Do they perceive one at all?

The Psychology of Inspiration

Psychologists describe two kinds of perception in human psychology: Perceptions that form above our threshold of awareness – *I heard that, I saw that* – and perceptions that form below our threshold of awareness – *I believe that*. While experienced marketers take advantage of both, perceptions formed below our threshold of awareness – our beliefs – are more long term in their effects on behavior and often more influential in decision making. They are cumulative and they affect our values, interests and our personalities.

As we go about the business of marketing our goods and services, it is important to recognize that stimulating the senses differs from the brain's interdependent processing of stimulation. Our ears hear sounds, but the brain perceives a melody. Our eyes see shapes and colors, but the brain processes these neural responses into distinctions between a painted portrait and the person modeling for the portrait. The senses are merely portals through which the body gathers information. From here, the brain takes over combining stimulus with reasoning, environment, memory and experience to first classify and then to respond to our fully processed impressions.

Successful communication of your company's particular persona and the manner in which your prospects respond to it is largely due to your understanding of how your prospects process sensory stimulus. Bigger, better, faster and cheaper may sound impressive as your

board of directors compares your company's market position against competitors, but can you wholly own the attention of your audience with such generic claims? How do your potential customers process these commonly sold corporate characteristics?

Within the boundaries of the industry-as-a-whole surrounding your company, there is a battle raging. And this might surprise you: It is not the one between you and your competitors. The battleground is psychological. It is a fight for the hearts and minds of your prospects.

By the time your audience has experience enough to take an interest in what you sell; they already tote a ton of useless informational baggage. You might say *they have been there and done that*. This ambivalent attitude adversely affects your ability to successfully lodge your company's personification in the mind of your prospect and make inroads that lead to sales.

The problem is simple to describe: Your prospects' receptors have switched over to autopilot and their radar is set to filter out background noise. Arguably, rejection is the default state of your prospects' sensory system. In the most practical sense, although the five senses are working just fine, your prospects' decision mechanism is out to lunch.

Characterize your company as bigger, better, faster and cheaper and you place very little demand on brain function. Classification is easy and your prospects' reaction predictable: *Sure, right, of course, whatever you say, what else would you tell me?*

How does your audience respond to these *just what I thought you would say* corporate descriptors? As a consumer, how do you respond? Discard and delete!

Who Says Your Company is Better?

Your company's ideal corporate persona is not one that describes who you are. It does not detail what you sell nor does it compare your company with your industry at large or with your immediate competitors. Your audience already expects you to say *you are better at it than the other company*. So why bother making such unimpressive claims?

Instead, your prospects process perceptions of your corporate identity and the value of your offering as a "belief," not as some kind of analysis based on empirical data. Before you can convert a prospect to a customer, you must first influence their feelings. Purchase decisions are based first on emotion; they are then justified with facts.

For example, brand names are little more than offerings to which their constituents have affixed a precise level of expectation. Brands deliver repeatedly, without variation, just what they delivered in prior experiences. More important and beyond their function, brands also deliver an implied performance warranty that brand users understand exists, but *believe* they will never need to call on for satisfaction. Brand names would not exist without belief.

Does a brand give your company a persuasive corporate persona? Sometimes it will, but not necessarily and not by itself. Remember the Yugo? Imported from Yugoslavia and billed as the cheapest automobile in America in 1985, its cars were laden with design and manufacturing flaws that carried the company to bankruptcy by 1989. In the interim, the Yugo did achieve a certain brand status, but not one to brag about. Americans did believe in the Yugo. They believed it reli-

ably delivered premature engine failure, a faulty electrical system, poor brakes and terrible dealer service.

Intrinsic to the concept of a persuasive corporate persona – a *branded* corporate persona – is the principle of credibility. Apple and Costco come to mind. How do you stack up? How does your company convey credibility as you deal with prospects who have never done business with you before? What can you do to influence their behavior so that their resulting choices accrue to your benefit?

It's Not About You

The reactive answer to this question is obvious: Simply describe your company as honorable, competitive and customer-centric. Okay, among your prospective constituents, who will believe you? Your competitors say the same thing whether it's true or not. Moreover, it is difficult to differentiate yourself if you convey the same information your competitors express or make the same claims your prospects have experienced before. Let's face it... Your industry's average claims are probably the same claims your prospects have rejected in the past. Declarations of competitive price, quality products and exceptional customer service are not adequately distinctive in a consumer wise society.

Preliminary perceptions of your corporate persona begin with the perceived *meaning* of your offering *as understood by your prospects* in advance of their conversion to customers. Many marketers miss this. It is the reason why you must go out of your way to relate to your prospects using their measuring stick. You must reverse-engineer the thoughts and emotions of your prospect and use your findings as the impetus of your identity.

Unlike trust, which is fundamental to your established customer relationships, you have yet to establish credibility with your prospects. Remember, these are prospects who share no experience with your company. They are skeptical of your claims at best and on a bad day, they're just downright cynical. Where initial or early impressions are concerned, there is very little you can say about your offering that your prospects will not hold at arms length for further assessment. Unless you first establish credibility, your prospects will seldom receive your claims at face value.

So how can you convince your prospects of the veracity of your claims? How do you establish favorable perceptions about your company with someone predisposed to rejecting your promises? To paraphrase AT&T's once popular jingle, "Reach out and touch someone." Express fundamental and salient truths your prospects already deem as truths and you're on your way to credibility in advance of doing business with them. Simply stated, relate to your prospects. Inspire them. Show them how well you understand them before you open your mouth about what you want to sell them.

There is No Alliance if *You* Don't Know How *I* Feel

In a recent Volkswagen television spot, consumers are given a rare insight into the mind of an influential marketer. The slow-motion scene opens to a young couple driving through city streets in a new Passat. As they navigate around a series of parked luxury sedans and performance cars, the camera pans the drivers of the parked cars. One by one, the drivers of each parked car lean out the window and with a bullhorn describe to the Passat driver and his passenger why they have chosen the expensive cars they drive. One driver, with a squeaky, but bullhorn-magnified voice twice harkens, "Because

my daddy didn't hug me." The next driver broadcasts his twisted values saying, "Because I make more money than you." In an admission of complete personal dysfunction, the driver of a bright yellow Viper exclaims, "Because I'm compensating for my shortcomings." With this, the camera shifts to the cabin of the Passat. From inside the VW, the Passat passenger – deciding she has nothing to say – glances past the driver toward you and I, turns back to her window and tosses her bullhorn onto the sidewalk without a word. The spot concludes as the camera tightens on the Passat nameplate with a voiceover that says, "The Volkswagen Passat... Lowest EGO emissions of any German built sedan."

To whom is this spot directed? Obviously, the commercial speaks to prospective buyers who see themselves as well adjusted auto enthusiasts, people who lead a balanced, functional and productive life. By communicating to the Volkswagen prospect an understanding of and an appreciation for their down-to-earth values, Volkswagen comes across as non-pretentious, intelligent and allied with their lifestyle. There is no mention of product features, no discussion of price. Neither will you find the auto industry standard fare of *zero-percent interest for well-qualified buyers*. Just the suggestion that, if you are well adjusted enough, if you do not need personal validation through your choice of transportation, VW is the company and the car for you. With the broadest of brushstrokes and in merely 30-seconds, Volkswagen successfully says to its core audience, *we know just how you feel and we appreciate your sensible lifestyle*.

The \$3-billion Pronoun

Whether or not you are a do-it-yourselfer, you are doubtless familiar with Home Depot and its smaller rival Lowe's. Home Depot is roughly twice the size of Lowe's,

even though Lowe's marathon 60-year history is more than twice that of Home Depot's comparatively short sprint in the home improvement industry. Home Depot's 2005 earnings of \$5.8 billion on sales of \$81.5 billion were more than double that of Lowe's 2005 earnings of \$2.8 billion on sales of \$43.2 billion.

Home Depot's stellar growth and industry leadership is the result of many factors, not the least of which is the company's self-effaced, approachable corporate persona. Many of the people you see in Home Depot's TV spots are real Home Depot employees, not actors. Yep! You can actually find these *stars* – real folks who genuinely tout the virtues of their employer – working in the aisles at your local store.

How do do-it-yourselfers sum up Home Depot's perceived corporate personality? One customer told me, "Home Depot encourages me to tackle projects I might not otherwise consider without their assistance." It is interesting to note that Home Depot's public persona is right in line with customer perceptions... or is it the other way around? With seven words and for several years now, Home Depot has thoughtfully positioned itself as just this kind of catalyst. Home Depot promises, "You can do it. We can help."

Lowe's also has a positioning statement tagged under its moniker, but in contrast and until recently, its message was completely self-serving. For several years, Lowe's claimed that it was "Improving Home Improvement." Okay...What does this statement tell you about Lowe's view of its customers? What does it tell you about Lowe's view of itself? As a corporate identifier, is this tagline meaningful to you? Is it applicable to your life and mine? From this text, what can you and I expect from the bargain when we buy from Lowes? Would you rather do business with a company that encourages you to take on

new challenges and promises to help if you're stuck, or would you prefer to work with a company that portrays itself with esoteric self-aggrandizement?

Consider the difference that a second person pronoun makes: Home Depot begins and ends its positioning tagline with "you" (the second "you" is implied.) You – meaning you and I – well, *we can do it!* That's nice to know (I had hoped that was the case.) We – meaning the \$81 billion home improvement company – can help (you and me.) Now I am encouraged because this is my first attempt at installing a septic tank. It's almost as though Home Depot promises to send home a qualified staffer in an orange apron to help me get things right. That is so nice of them.

But Lowe's? The very idea of *Improving Home Improvement* is detached, impersonal and meaningless, except perhaps, to the ad people who sat around a boardroom table coming up with the idea. Obviously, the creators of this corporate personification didn't understand their prospects or at minimum, failed to communicate Lowe's concerns for them. Lowe's customers are not interested in improving home improvement. Much like Home Depot customers, they just want to fix the toilet. Wisely, Lowe's recently repositioned itself with a new, more Home Depot-like tagline: *Let's build something together.*

The Common Denominators

Nordstrom, Volkswagen and Home Depot get it! What do they get? Humanity! What they do with it, you can do too. Here is how.

If you are uncertain about your present corporate identity, the first item of business on your marketing agenda is that of corporate introspection. What does your corporate

persona look like to your prospects? How do they perceive your understanding of their plight in life? Do you identify with them or is your company guilty of corporate vanity? Obviously, the latter is most undesirable.

With the answers to these questions in mind, formulate your marketing strategy to include these guidelines:

Start with your prospect, not with your product or company: What are their experiences? What do they think? How can you tailor your persona so that you are perceived as the best fit?

Consider your competitors: What do they say? Do they cluster together in appearance and common claims? For you, these claims are off-limit. Forget what you know about your company and your competition; from your prospects' viewpoint, consider whether your competitors are all that different from your company?

Presence and volume are not enough. Rather understand your prospects and express true compassion for them in shared experiences. Don't pretend to walk in their shoes. Leave your office and walk in them.

Embrace the values your prospects' embrace and communicate your appreciation for why these values make your prospect unique and not part of a mass market.

In print, online and across every marketing venue, include your prospects in your dialog with them. Influential marketing is not about you – it is about them.

Encourage and inspire your prospects by altering perceptions from “just like the rest” to “not-at-all like the rest.” And remember, product distinctions are seldom inspirational. People are.

Finally, establish your credibility by feeling what your prospects feel and communicating this connection to those you want to reach. Your prospects must sense that you truly believe what they believe and that together you are like-minded and fundamentally connected.

Blind and deaf prospects are commonplace across the landscape of contemporary consumerism. Indeed, we (and they) are the norm. Your mastery of Recognology® is vital to your company's growth and its success. Yet, the benefits of such mastery extend beyond the mere schlepping of goods and services or the improvement of your bottom line. As your prospects-turned-customers will attest: Recognology® restores sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. For these, your customers will gladly give you their dedication and admire you for life.

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