



Getting A Head Start On The Competition

BY JOHN GRAHAM

REPRINTED FROM

agency sales[®] magazine

february 2010 · vol.40, no.02

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*Customer
Driven*

People are breathing a little easier and the mood is becoming more optimistic. Some “experts” tell us, “The worst is behind us.” Yet, spending time convincing ourselves that the “cup is half full” is both an irresistible and totally useless exercise. It wastes personal and business resources, while not changing a thing, and diverts us from taking positive action.

It you want to get a head start on the competition in the year

ahead, here are several tools that will help you make a difference in 2010.

Sleeping companies will be playing catch up. If you’re expecting the economic tide to float your boat any time soon, you may be in for a surprise. At least, that’s the way Wal-Mart sees it. According to an Associated Press story, the company’s chairman, Robert Walton, says, “I think this recovery will be a slow one.” That’s why

Wal-Mart is on the move. “There is change and opportunity in a crisis,” states Walton.

Wal-Mart, HP, GE, Siemens and many others are taking major steps to raise their visibility and to capture more of their existing business. Sure, they’re huge enterprises, but why not learn from the leaders?

Customer blindness causes most marketing failures. The problem starts when companies

are more interested in what they want to accomplish instead of what the customer wants, needs or appreciates.

The iPhone went from zero to top brand in the smartphone market in just three years, zooming past the “leaders.” How did this happen? The apps are the answer. For example, you don’t need to be of concert-going age to appreciate iConcertCal, the app that scans the music on your iPhone or iPod, then gives you information on when your favorite artists will be performing in your area. And BeamME lets me email my

updated on what’s been happening. “This business is exciting, and I enjoy keeping those who helped us build the bank engaged with the bank,” says Tony Nuzzo of First Commons Bank in Newton, Massachusetts. Although he headed several banks over the past 20 years, it’s no accident that he started his career with Procter & Gamble in marketing.

Contrast Nuzzo’s way of cultivating customers with what happened to the business executive who spent \$10,000 on hearing aids from two companies in just over six years. As mind-boggling as it

of purchase) may top just about any conceivable list. Why spend millions on a crucial marketing campaign using a spokesperson who knows nothing about the car business and who was selected for the job by the government? The answer, of course, is displeasingly obvious: you want his support for spending the government’s money on advertising.

Good marketing requires objectivity, and that requires distance and the absence of ego. That eliminates at least 90% of CEOs.

Be wary of marketing fads. That includes the social media,

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contact info on the spot. Business cards are sales-driven, BeamMe is customer-driven.

Whether I want to see the latest news, read a book, look for a coffee shop, make a reservation at a restaurant, play a game, take notes, send a file or perform any of a thousand other tasks, I can do each of them with the ease and convenience of my iPhone.

The iPhone is all about the customer, not the company that makes it. Maybe that’s why Apple is solid to the core. Doing whatever it takes to make a difference for the customer is the big job.

Never lose contact with customers. Weekly, the president of a new community bank sends an electronic newsletter to each of his 300 investors keeping them

may seem, neither reached out to him, not even once. Why not an annual checkup? Why not helpful tips? Why not a satisfaction survey? Why not a little personal attention? Why not information on new, improved technology? Whatever the business, there are always ways to improve and build customer relationships.

Keep the CEO’s hands off marketing. While there are notable exceptions (Nuzzo being one of them), most CEOs are so focused on “the company” and have trouble seeing the customer clearly. Of all the incredibly stupid things General Motors Co. has done lately, featuring its “non-executive chairman” in its “May the Best Car Win” campaign (offering a money-back guarantee within 60 days

such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Just because something is the current rage and you don’t want to be left out, doesn’t mean you should drop everything and wade in up to your eyes.

There is no marketing panacea, and there are no shortcuts. Marketing takes time, energy and money. Unless you are ready to commit the time and resources to develop a following, look in other directions. If you don’t take marketing seriously, you will be left behind.

Watch out for pressures to separate marketing and sales. Salespeople are known to have “problems” with marketers. They see themselves on the top of the totem pole and marketers somewhere far below. Unfortunately,

they seem to be separated further and further today. That's trouble. For a company's sales to be successful, both are needed. For each to move closer to the top, they need to listen and learn from one another. Both need to ratchet down their foolhardy arrogance.

Diversify your marketing activities. Marketing today is far more demanding than ever before. In a word, it's complicated. It's a matter of following the customers – being where they are and offering messages that speak to even the tiniest market segments.

Sensitivity to the way customers think and behave is the marketing task. One marketing agency seems to be on the right track by surveying a client's customers to learn which hour of the day or night they want to receive eBulletins. In the same way, it's surveying hundreds of business people to better understand what they want from the salespeople who call on them.

Don't let "free" bite you in the end. It will do exactly that if you let it. The power of free is enormous, a pervasive state of mind driven by the Internet. In fact, it's blinding. Free has power, and it's what customers expect today. However, don't be fooled by free. Just because sending 10,000 emails is free, doesn't mean they produce positive results.

Put an edge on your message. Bland leads to blasé, and that's deadly. For example, give customers a guarantee that has teeth (WSJ, 9/13/09, "Why Hyundai Is an American Hit"). The company lays down the gauntlet. It puts money on the line. It dares the customer to go elsewhere – and it works, as the sales figures attest.

Then there's GM's watered-down and totally wimpy 60-day money-back guarantee. Who

wants to buy anything and then admit they made a mistake? The issue is quality and a 60-day "guarantee" is ludicrous, typical of a corporate mindset that always stacks the deck against the customer. It's as if GM is afraid to step up to the plate with an attention-getting guarantee that rocks.

Without a sharp edge, there is no effective message.

Whatever the economic situation in 2010, sitting around keeping our fingers crossed is irresponsible. It's time to stick our heads out and be seen. It's time to put marketing to work. ☞

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