



Create Customers for Life Market Your Company Relationally

As a consumer, you probably don't think of yourself as a victim. Your choice of toothpaste hardly defines you as a casualty. But, have you ever given much thought to why you choose Crest over Aqua-Fresh? You may think, hey, I like the taste of Crest or I want a brighter smile with fresher breath. No question, these are perfectly legitimate reasons to continue using the toothpaste of your choice. Do you remember, however, why you opted with this choice in the first place? Before you had a preference, you didn't know what Crest tasted like and you were probably not sure about the brighter smile or fresher-breath thing either. Yet, you took the plunge and brought your first tube of Crest home. Many years later, Crest is still the toothpaste you prefer.

To be sure, the makers of Crest thank you. Your fondness of the Crest brand has been quite an annuity for Procter & Gamble and for its stockholders. Though you may not recall why you tried the brand so long ago, you can be certain that P&G knows why: Relational Marketing.

In the beginning, the folks at P&G got together and, with your lifestyle and your lifetime in mind, developed a marketing strategy solely intended to win you into their camp of smiling consumers. You were pursued, targeted and fired on. And if you bought Crest, clearly you were hit. It is doubtful, however, that you feel bad about this. You like Crest. Each time you see a Crest advertisement, you probably feel confidently reassured. Yep, that is my toothpaste.

Realize it or not, the power of relational marketing is monumentally influential even though most of the time it is invisible. As consumers, we follow the marketers of our choice like the proverbial horse to water. For the most part,

we don't even know we've been led. Indeed, as Americans, we take pride in our independence and freedom of choice. But does free choice exist absent the persuasion of marketers? Not as much as you may think. As consumers our senses are tugged at from every direction. Our decisions to buy just about everything can be traced to some form of marketing, either transactional or relational.

What is it about the marketing discipline that gives it such persuasion over our behavior? Perceptions!

Marketing Your Offering Equates with Managing Consumer Perceptions

In the most basic sense, marketing is little more than a communication methodology blended with practical psychology. It is the sum of procedures by which goods & services are directed into the hands of consumers. Influential marketing affects the manner in which our minds organize and process information. In particular, marketing strategies influence how, once we have processed new or important information, the decision to buy is affected.

For some observers, marketing methodology is confused with sales processes. They are different. Marketing is holistic and strategic. It is usually indiscernible to consumers. Sales procedures are tactical and often mechanical. For experienced consumers sales procedures are obvious, even undesirable.

Influential marketing does no less than shape our thinking and change our behavior. When thoughtfully implemented, marketing elicits an affirmative response from the audience to whom it is directed. The reason you pre-

fer Crest to Aqua Fresh is seated in more than Crest's great taste. You relate to Crest's positioning; the unique perceptions and preferences you attach to your lifestyle and find fulfilled in your choice of toothpaste.

No doubt, P&G has worked hard to understand you and has waged a valiant fight among other toothpaste contestants to win your allegiance. Their victory is not one that is merely isolated to the marketplace either. P&G has won the battle for your mind. Has your company done the same with your prospects and customers?

It is Difficult to Successfully Market Your Wares if Your Message is not Credible

What not to do!

Consider our present economic slow-down and fragile world political condition. Folks are concerned. Consumer spending is down and big-ticket extravagance has dropped off in lock step with declining consumer confidence. Opinions about the future are absolutely tentative.

Lynn Franco, Director of The Conference Board Consumer Research Center comments: The Consumer Confidence Index is now (September '07) at its lowest level in nearly two years (November '05). Weaker business conditions combined with a less favorable job market continue to cast a cloud over consumers and heighten their sense of uncertainty and concern. Looking ahead, little economic improvement is expected and with the holiday season around the corner this is not welcome news.

In response to our slowing economy, industries have scrambled to reassure consumers. The automobile industry's attempt to encourage favorable opinions despite the downturn is an obvious example. Your local newspaper is bloated with automotive ads offering bargain basement

pricing, rebates and free financing. The industry situation is desperate, yet from the ad copy and TV spots, you might miss this.

Auto manufacturers are quick to avoid the truth by frankly admitting, We are drowning in record inventories so we are slashing prices and offering cheap loans to pull our butts out of the fire. Instead, the industry conveys a buoyantly optimistic position that declares: We are doing OUR part to keep America rolling with zero percent financing and \$2,500 cash back.

At face value, and only at face value, the industry's offer appears admirable. Indeed, the auto industry wants to be viewed as idealistic and high-minded suggesting in its ads they are doing consumers a favor. And the plan is so simple: Americans can express their patriotism and support our economic growth while getting a new Buick in the bargain.

Even more overt than the industry-wide duplicity to paint a consumer-centric face is the obvious acknowledgement by Ford that consumer deception is okay. In a recent series of TV spots titled Swap Your Ride, Ford tells viewers:

We went around swapping people's vehicles for one week. We didn't tell them we were from Ford. We told them it was "market research."

Wait a minute. Do I look stupid? What I am supposed to take away from the Swap Your Ride campaign? That Ford really went around to consumers and deceived them into believing they were conducting an unbiased research poll? Or should I believe that Ford thinks it's okay to betray the truth in the interest of selling cars? Either way, I'm not buying a Ford. More important though, Ford's endorsement of the ruse reveals something about its corporate values. They reflect poorly on Ford's corporate persona.

The failure of industry execs to alter perceptions – even slightly – is evident in the stagnation of sales resulting from their thinly disguised marketing ploy. Doubtless, some consumers do ignore reality and respond, but make no mistake: Few consumers take the bait, a least not hook, line and sinker. Despite auto maker's profit-motivated compassion for our fears and their empathetic expressions toward over-borrowed consumers, the industry line lacks credibility. Can anyone really relate to a message that says we care so very much about you Mr. and Mrs. America... Drive home today?

So, what might impress the American consumer to take action? Frankly. The truth. Wouldn't we all feel better about the auto industry if it humbly reached out to consumers with a message that said, Look, we're in a real bind here. Yes, we have taken advantage of consumers in the past and not lived up to our promised standards. We killed electric-car technology by crushing EV1s into scrap and we are in collusion with the oil industry to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, if we go under, the entire nation will suffer. Jobs will be lost. Families will be hurt. Help us out. We will make it worth your while today and we will never take you for granted again.

That would do it. Of course, this is just a suggestion. Yet the concept applies to your company too, even if you are already high-minded and truly consumer oriented. Credibility is the essence of influential marketing.

Growing Your Market Demands Anticipating Ideals Before they are Ideals

What to do!

Artful marketing, much like a lens, focuses our personal views of goods & services, at least at the outset. The intrinsic nature of that which is marketed – in our previous example, industry attempts to appear noble and the pur-

chase your new Buick – remains unchanged before and after marketing methodologies have been applied. Automakers are still in a bind. Your new car is still a Buick.

Only our viewpoint has shifted. The reasons for our economic & political concerns have not. The economy still languishes. Terrorists are still out there. However, these leather seats and my new On-Star system sure help me think less about these problems.

Your company will best prevail among your competitors if you look ahead of your prospects to trends in audience ideals rather than focusing only on their locality today. Consider the likely trajectory of your prospects' values and determine where your company might intersect with these ideals relationally, somewhere down the road.

Although Levi's has been the dominant name in denims for over a century, its appeal to Gen-X and Gen-Ys is weak – the Levis brand is considered stogy and lack style so is the thinking. Taking advantage of this widespread belief, Tommy Hilfiger has successfully connected with the 80-million or so kids born after 1976 with Tommy Jeans and a variety of related Tommy Hilfiger products. What was the company's approach? Trajectory marketing: Figuring out where on the denim highway consumers would soon be and getting to the intersection ahead of them with a credible and relatable message.

To accomplish this, Tommy loaded the media with contemporary personalities attired in TJs. Included among the dozens of stars sporting the Tommy logo were Britney Spears, Metallica, TLC and Destiny's Child. The inference was subtle and simple: Gen-Ys would see their favorite performers wearing Tommys and conclude that, if it's good for them, it's good for me. For young, soon-to-be consumers whose personal values often identify with the perceived values of those they admire, the endorsements were a no-brainer. And while celebrity

endorsements are nothing new, there is a deeper marketing principle at work here, something more than simply celebrity association. It is a principle you can master: Associative marketing.

Look carefully at your industry and you will no doubt find forces that draw your prospects to it. What are these influences? How might they be used as vehicles to which you can hitch your company horse?

In the fast food business for example, McDonald's and Burger King link-up hit TV programs and successful movies as launch points for merchandising Whopper consuming Nickelodeon figurines and American Idol Happy Meals.

The employment of associative marketing is the equivalent of taking a shortcut to your prospect's decision center. Because the associated portion of the message – American Idol – is already stored and processed as credible and desirable, it is a much shorter jump for the associated product or service – the Happy Meal – to reach similar critical mass. Of particular interest is the fact that, for the most part, the Happy Meal contains the same food staples as it always has – a burger, fries and a drink. Yet, perceptions of the product change with each iteration of association and for each generation of Happy Meal consumers. As one consumer group ages away from their version of the Happy Meal, the next batch of consumers replaces it under the icon of a freshly recast association. Buz Lightyear Happy Meals – once the rave – now reside near infinity and beyond.

Psychologists point to perception as more than just a sensory response. Perception is a cognitive process whereby the mind organizes sensory input and interprets it. Many marketers fail to look beyond the simplicity of sensory input in their marketing strategies. They appeal largely to the senses of sight and sound in their messaging; then they wonder why their message hits a brick wall, despite precise targeting. Your recognition of sen-

sory limitations is your opportunity to gain ground.

Your marketing is most effective if you consider the mind's organizational processes. We hear sounds in frequencies and volume, but we perceive a song. We see light in colors and intensity, but our cognitive processes paint a picture. The bits and pieces of our senses create a summary, complete and intact, that represents each personal reality.

Marketing that is directed toward this completed picture is more effective than mere sensory stimulation because it is efficient: Sensory bits and pieces need not be assembled and interpreted. The interpretation is already complete, right there before your eyes – or ears. By tying your message to already-credible icons, your message assumes similar credibility.

So, if you manufacture aerospace components, it might be useful to associate your company with launch vehicles, satellite communication or the International Space Station. To distinctly frame your message though, you must paint a picture that summarizes your significance far beyond that of your offering. Tommy Hilfiger does this by implication, suggesting that Tommy Jeans transform those attired in them into high-profile icons.

Your approach might begin with something like:

Perhaps you've wondered why NASA chose the SafetyFirst Aerospace Fastener for the International Space Station...

Your copy might be augmented with a photo of the Space Station, not floating serenely above the crescent Earth, but attached to the fabric of space with a safety pin. Your inference and importance are obvious: Your aerospace fasteners keep the International Space Station pinned to the heavens.

The Contrarian's Approach

Credibility also is established by disassociation. Many industries are plagued with perennial problems known to all, customers and competitors alike.

Remove yourself from these problems. Present a position that resolves these issues and identifies your offering with a fully assembled, big-picture conclusion. Your solution will appear bigger than life.

Suppose your company's offering is more down-to-earth than that of a space station safety pin. Perhaps you manufacture toilets, for example and your primary audience is homebuilders.

Among the problems your audience faces is long lead times and spotty availability. Often, homebuilders are forced to postpone completions because of a decade-long shortage of toilet fixtures. To the builder you might say:

When it's time to go... Your customers don't care why their toilets aren't there.

This message is presented with imagery, stylized in Norman Rockwell fashion that depicts a child, crouched and about to drop his drawers, but as he turns to look for the toilet, he is aghast to see there is none. Your concluding copy then tags up the image with, *Reliable Toilet Company, Delivered When Promised.*

Your goal is to cue responses from your prospects' predispositions. When you employ this approach, prospects find themselves in familiar territory and are inclined to agree with the premise you present rather than pondering the truthfulness of your claims. Builders know that toilets are in short supply. NASA's choice of fasteners must be based on extensive research and testing. Each premise is credible.

How can relational marketing help your company? Here are a few suggestions.

FIRST: Forget the idea that prospects perceive a considerable difference between your offering and that of your closest competitors. They don't. Even if this were the case, such differences are not singularly motivational – Tommy Jeans are just jeans without their perceived association to celebrity values and ideals, even if they are manufactured to higher standards of quality. And if variances are demonstrable, these distinctions are often mitigated by price differences or perceptions by your audience that such characteristics do not change the overriding benefit. DHL and Fedex deliver your next-day packages by 10:30 am, but because Fedex owns the idea of overnight delivery, DHL is perceived only as a cheaper also-ran.

SECOND: Pay close attention to your competitors' messaging. What spin do they put on their offering? If your competitors truly are competing, you'll see that they have pushed their connection with prospects beyond the sensory-only and are speaking to the cognitive processes that paint a complete picture, not just a piece of the puzzle. All toothpastes probably prevent cavities, but your customers want everything that comes with a brighter smile and fresher breath: Good health, romance, success and popularity.

FINALLY: Remember that your successful implementation of relational marketing is directly proportional to your ability to connect with your prospect's deep rooted values. To communicate well with your audience, you need more than just the facts ma'am: Features and benefits are not enough. Your offering must convey an inviting association that your prospects perceive as pertinent to their life or lifestyle. Your message must be credible: One that prospects can nod their heads "Yes" to and be pictured

as a part of. Hitch your corporate wagon to these attributes and your marketing will maneuver like the ultimate driving machine.

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