



Does Creativity Guarantee Brand Success?

HOW TO DETERMINE IF AN IDEA IS REALLY PERSUASIVE

Miller Brewing Company recently announced the repeal of the much buzzed about Man-Law campaign. We learn that the brand's novel ad series got shelved because sales are slipping. Perhaps there are other reasons why sales are off besides the ad effort, but there is an interesting condition here that raises its head routinely in the marketing communications world...

Evidence abounds that occasionally an idea or campaign that is easily recognized as creative or intrusive by virtue of its cleverness or interesting twist on conventions and culture -- in the final analysis fails to move the marketing needle. What's going on here? You look at an idea and exclaim proudly -- "smells creative to me." You feel bullish about the idea because it plows new ground, rocks your sensibilities around distinguishing your brand. Perhaps it aligns with

pop culture trends and you think its absolutely buzz worthy. You approve the thing and put the money in gear. Everything is cool until you analyze outcomes and it appears the creative dog wouldn't hunt on the sales trail. No one took the bait. This condition by the way applies to PR as much as it does to advertising and promotion. Perplexing and vexing isn't it?

Clever PR stunts can draw editorial media attention and gain coverage, but when the smoke clears -- the consumer fails to do what they're supposed to and respond properly -- as in buy the product. Perhaps it's the product's fault? Or the timing? Well maybe. But let's not just lash ourselves to the denial wagon quite yet -- perhaps indeed the idea that was by definition creative and clever was really the wrong idea. Was the coverage about the product or more about the stunt?

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When is awareness and buzz just an end in itself?

When the preponderance of editorial media activity is more about the agency and the campaign than it is about the product, there's a watch-out. Real and authentic relevance to the passions and lifestyle concerns of the target is especially important when attempting to vet ideas about their persuasive powers. Here's an interesting example from the beer business:

Our firm handled PR for Molson USA and the Molson beer portfolio. An epiphany occurred for this wonderful client during a series of meetings with a few prominent distributors. Molson's ad campaign was clever, edgy, pop-culture bending and unique. An example: fake magazine covers adorned the back side of popular men's magazines that could be placed on a guys coffee table as part of making him seem more alluring to a potential dating prospect – see below:



TrustFund (just one in a series) was supposed to signal to women – hey this guy is rich. It was fun, engaging, creative, different and humorous.

The premise: Molson beer helps you get dates. But...

Distributors frequently employ young men who go into bar and nightclub accounts to help execute promotions, maintain good relations with account owners and talk up the brand. They are in many respects the bulls-eye target audience for these campaigns. Brand execs at Molson asked these guys what they thought of the edgy ads. Remarkably what they heard was unexpected: "Yeah it's edgy alright and we got the joke too. Very creative. But if you're asking me as a consumer if it helps make me want to buy your beer, the answer is no. You guys need to help me respect your beer."

Oh my. Everyone thought this audience was focused exclusively on the social hustle with the ladies. Well surprise, there was another point of

view: "I actually care about what I drink." Authentic forms of communication that are relevant to the concerns and passions of the target – you can get this right or you can get this wrong.

Tangential conversations

When communication is not about the product at all but about a lifestyle idea that runs parallel to the product, there's always a chance the conversation will simply miss the mark. If the premise is there's nothing really strong and alluring to talk about related to the product, then there's a larger problem no ad or PR campaign will fix.

Direct conversations

Consider Apple Computer's recent ad campaign – just genius. It's front and center about the product but done in a clever and engaging way. It is powerful but never boring. It is revealing and entertaining but also relevant. It exploits weaknesses in the competing technology without sounding self-congratulatory.



It humanizes the brand and creates engaging metaphors that play to the image differences between PCs and Macs. It burnishes the latent rumor mill that Macs have always enjoyed as easy and fun to use. This is great stuff. Effective too.

Direction

Great story telling must begin with an over-arching strategic platform that helps guide the creative process away from ideas that fill the "clever" glass to the brim but don't overflow with positive business results. The consumer is smarter, better informed than we often give them credit for and can smell an idea vacant of any real substance from a mile away. To reach someone in the heart as well as head, messaging must be about things that matter, that make a difference to the consumer's life. These strategic threads can be discovered -- it just takes some digging. Along with discipline that at the end of the day, this is about achieving business results – all other imperatives are secondary. In the PR business we believe above all else, the end game isn't just securing a story in the Wall Street Journal or a segment on NBC TODAY, it's about the substance of what's conveyed.