PUGET SOUND Business Journal
Business Leaders Get It.

JUNE 2013

Is your marketing "too smart" for its own good?

Smart, strategic thinking is a highly valued asset in every aspect of business, including marketing. However, sometimes an overemphasis on "being smart" can push the best-laid marketing off course. As an on-call chief marketing officer I've seen it happen time and again. Sometimes the smartest people can be their own worst enemy when it comes to making effective marketing decisions. Because the derailment of marketing is often veiled behind critical thinking, no one is the wiser while it's happening. However, after that fact the impact is sadly apparent.

Here are four clues that your marketing may be at risk of slipping off course because your approach is too smart for its own good.

1. Marketing Paralysis by Analysis

This situation is common with young marketing organizations lacking experience. Paralysis often arises due to sloppy review processes, whereby marketing lacks clear decision-making parameters and allows reviewers to voice new thoughts and ideas throughout the process instead of defining a clear decision-making process and pathway. While new ideas are often insightful, they can lead to analysis at the wrong times. Additionally marketing teams that don't strategically manage decision making and reviews are by default encouraging lazy reviewers. People learn that they can provide feedback late and continually suggest changes, leading to marketing stagnation as projects change focus and restart. Analysis of new ideas and feedback is obviously a smart step, however it needs to be carefully managed to avoid paralysis.

Executive Insights

Cheryl Isen

2. The Curse of Perfectionism

Within every company, lives a very bright person who is well respected because they are so smart. This person drills into the minutia, no matter how long it takes and cares deeply about every aspect of a project being correct. If a perfectionist is involved in marketing the potential for multiple restarts and copy rewrites can reach code red. Although the edits and feedback provided by a perfectionist may be intelligent and useful, by iteration seven or eight, problems arise. The team developing the copy burns out—after all, they can only rewrite with enthusiasm so many times. Continual rewrites also stagnate the entire marketing engine: projects don't reach implementation and marketing talent is kept from starting new work. Clearly, the desire for perfection must be balanced with the need to move forward. The 80-20 rule is a great guide.

3. Decision by Group

It's generally true that integrating a group of smart, knowledgeable people into your marketing efforts makes sense. Challenges arise however, when it isn't clear at the onset what each group members' roles and responsibilities are around decision-making. Without clarification, grey areas and inefficiency manifest, opinions clash and engagement levels vary. Lacking a framework for decision-making, a call for consensus and compromise becomes the default. Group consensus decisions put your entire marketing program at risk. Although many smart individuals may be part of the group, consensus decisions are often watered down, or based on the most vocal opinion. This often leads to a lack of group cohesiveness: some group members may not feel heard because their ideas aren’t used, and those whose ideas are implemented will view the consideration of every opinion as a waste of their valuable time. Either way, everyone is frustrated. Worse, the idea of tapping into a smart group of people to drive the marketing leads to a poor outcome.

4. Waiting to Lead

Unwilling to take risks, some organizations feel that the smart marketing approach is to wait to see what the competition does before taking marketing action. Their strategy is to observe how others market, followed by a go/no go analysis. If the competitive marketing bombs the company avoids the expense and time, and if it works they can quickly follow. Although seemingly smart, the problems with this marketing strategy are twofold. First, the company using this tactic will build a market perception as a follower. Second, over time marketing teams at these companies often lose their inventiveness and creativity, because those skills aren’t rewarded or required of followers. Caution is not always synonymous with strategic decision-making—often the smart decision rests in taking bold, calculated risks, learning from your own mistakes and a willingness to keep trying.

When it comes to smart marketing it’s important to ensure that one decision supersedes all others: know when you’re overthinking things. Be clear about how decisions will be made and when to stop the “smart” input, cut your losses and move on.

This column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps companies increase visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com.

Visit IsenandCo.com to learn more.