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Marketing Tradeoffs vs. the Cost of More

As a Chief Marketing Officer for hire, I hear a single four-lettered word echoed repeatedly by clients in marketing discussions. Happily, it does not start with the dreaded S, F or D. It starts with M. It is the universal plea for “more”.

To the uninitiated, when a company requests more and more from marketing, it might seem like a good thing. After all, a demand for more means marketing has value. The problems arise when the mandate is not reconciled with the trade-offs needed to reconcile the people, time and budget resources required to deliver “more”.

Here is a common scenario. An event transpires. Perhaps an RFP is lost. In the process of determining why, the company concludes that competitors are outflanking it. They are being out-marketed. Urgent discussion ensues around the need for more of something e.g. PR, digital marketing or advertising, email marketing, social media, content marketing, webinars, events or all of the above. Lickety-split, a burst of marketing activity is unleashed. The available marketing team scrambles to launch new programs. With any luck, short-term success follows.

Unfortunately, the key question almost everyone forgets to ask is this: At the cost of what?

The Cost of More

This is the underbelly of the dreaded four-lettered, “more”. No matter how much a company tries not to see it, “more” has a cost. Winning organizations acknowledge this. Others do not.

A common trap most companies suffer is the inability to make critical marketing tradeoffs. I liken this to a kid in a candy store. Wide-open eyes scan the colorful candy displays. With excitement, more and more treasures are selected, anticipating the delight to come. However, the end is always the same. It is the pain of over indulgence. With funds gone, exhaustion and recriminations linger.

When companies force too much too soon, often marketing operations and resources are not in place to manage the effort effectively. This becomes a losing strategy with the same result—funds are depleted and finger pointing begins.

Executive Insights

Cheryl Isen

Hidden Costs of “Just-in-Time” Marketing

Adding “more and more” marketing without resource planning translates into a “just in time” marketing approach built on a weak foundation supported by minimal strategy. The “get ’r done” approach is symptomatic of unacknowledged resource limitations. Constrained teams make short cut tradeoff decisions unconsciously, often putting the brand and strategy at risk.

For example, in the rush to perform, KPIs are ignored. Without metrics to verify if a program is working or failing, budget resources fall into a dubious hole. Is the program worth doing? Who knows, just get ‘r done and move on. This approach unconsciously dismisses strategy at the expense of producing more.

Similarly, just in time marketing can put the brand at risk. Often quality is undercut because no one has time to proof documents, adhere to brand standards, or ensure consistent messaging. Overtime brand and image erodes creating market confusion.

Even more disturbing, “just in time marketing” operates in isolation. No one has time to consider how to leverage efforts. This creates a zero tolerance mindset for the right kind of “more”. For example, if the emphasis is on producing a schedule of webinars, no one takes time to leverage any one webinar. With a focus on moving on to the next, there isn’t time to pitch the previous webinar takeaways to the media, post insights on LinkedIn or summarize the thought leadership perspective. Sadly, this low hanging fruit is left to rot away at the illusion of the value of working on the next webinar.

Strategic Tradeoffs

To avoid the high cost of more it’s critical to acknowledge that every choice has a strategic tradeoff. Before requesting that marketing take on “more”, take time to consider four strategic questions:

- What is the cost of more? Anything additional always has a cost, but some are hidden. Assess what the resource costs of the added opportunity will be. Do these tradeoffs make sense with the current strategy and company needs? If additional funds won’t be allocated to new work, is it worth scaling back an existing marketing program? What costs will that have?
- What do we buy with less? Sometimes saying “no” to a new idea or discontinuing existing marketing initiatives is the smartest strategy. It can buy the organization time to build out a quality marketing foundation and infrastructure with best practices and measurement that enable the organization to grow and strategically add “more” later. What will you buy if you say no?
- What is the impact of keeping the status quo? In assessing the tradeoffs, don’t forget to consider whether keeping everything the same, for now, is the best move. Sometimes it will make sense to be the first to take a new initiative, other times its best to stay the course and learn on the backs of others by letting them go first.

- What are the other options? Marketing tradeoffs don't all have to involve adding more or choosing less to improve something. Sometimes just adjusting the marketing mix seasonally is a good idea. Other times choosing to do it all, albeit more slowly as budget and people resources allow, is the right move for the company. Whichever you choose, thinking through the strategic tradeoffs beforehand is the smartest option.

Cheryl Isen is president of Isen and Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm she founded in 2001. Serving as an organization's "CMO to go", Cheryl and her network of talented associates run or supplement a company's marketing and Public Relations efforts.

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