

## Match brand identity and guest experience to maximize ad dollars

By DENISE LEE YOHN

**(Aug. 10, 2009)** Do you hear that sound? The one that sounds like a toilet flushing? It's actually the sound of your advertising dollars going to waste as a customer encounters an in-store experience that doesn't deliver on the one promised in your ad. Or when your point of purchase materials are completely disconnected from your broadcast campaign.

It's scary. The chain restaurant industry spent a whopping \$5.3 billion on media advertising in 2007, the last full year for which data is available, according to TNS Media Intelligence. The top 10 chains alone spent nearly \$3 billion. Big ad campaigns make compelling brand statements, but customers often become disappointed or confused when they get to the restaurants. Even if your budget is only a fraction of these big spenders' amounts, it's likely your advertising sets up expectations that may not be met.

So how do you close the gap between the aspirational vision in your advertising and the actual customer experience at your restaurant? Integrate your brand into everything your company does and align everyone and everything with your brand. From employees to in-store communications to every touchpoint at the restaurant, your brand should be the common thread that runs through everything and ties it all together.

**People.** Everyone who works for or with your company should share one common understanding of your brand and how they should interpret and reinforce it in their daily actions and decision-making. It may be difficult to engage a workforce with high turnover and in some cases low commitment to the company, but these are the very reasons why doing so is so important.

A brand toolbox is an effective way to inspire, inform and instruct your managers and employees. Here are the actions that make up an effective toolbox:

- Relay the brand identity and positioning along with the background and rationale to increase understanding and buy-in, and outline principles and examples to guide appropriate brand execution.
- Connect people to a purpose and values bigger than themselves, get them excited about working on the brand, and motivate them to adopt behaviors which support it.
- Help people make decisions and take actions that are "on brand" through interactive exercises and decision guides.

Jack in the Box, for example, uses its brand toolbox to drive the brand identity embodied by Jack, the chain's chief executive character, into its in-store experience. The toolbox includes a description of how the brand personality impacts the way employees serve guests and a decision tool that prescribes when to use Jack and how.

**Communications.** In many companies, different groups work on different communication vehicles. An advertising agency might produce the broadcast campaigns, while an in-house unit is responsible for point-of-purchase materials. Or the corporate office may drive the development of some materials and leave others to be handled by field offices.

Disconnects usually result. Your advertising promotes one offer, while your in-store materials feature another. Or sometimes information overload happens, and your customers are bombarded with too many different marketing messages.

Developing an integrated communications development process and clear responsibility assignment protocol can help. An integrated communications development process establishes a single timeline for every marketing initiative or promotion, incorporating broadcast advertising, restaurant signage, menus and menu boards, in-store materials, ethnically or regionally targeted efforts, public relations and social-media tactics. It identifies different points in creative development when the groups responsible for each of the individual components come together to coordinate efforts and determine competing priorities, if necessary.

A clear protocol for assigning roles and responsibilities in communications development clarifies the process for all involved. Who is the driver? Who gives input or feedback? Who is the approver? Clearly outlining these up front means communications get developed more efficiently and smoothly. Most importantly, it ensures that a unified brand message is

communicated clearly and consistently.

**Touchpoints.** Employee interactions and communications are only some of the aspects of the in-restaurant customer experience. Restaurant layout, employee uniforms, service standards and procedures, tabletop pieces or food trays, children's menus, and carryout packaging all contribute to the experience a customer has with your brand.

Each touchpoint represents an opportunity to make a "deposit" in your brand equity—positive, differentiating and brand-building—or a "withdrawal" in that equity—disappointing, unmemorable or inappropriate.

As such, you need to audit, prioritize and optimize the touchpoints that comprise the customer experience at your restaurants. Developing a brand touchpoint wheel helps you identify all of the touchpoints between your brand and your customers. The wheel also indicates the internal teams that drive the various touchpoints.

Once your brand touchpoint wheel is complete, you can use it to assess which touchpoints have the most impact and which are the most "off brand." Then you can pursue strategies and plans for optimizing the priority touchpoints.

One company, working with a brand touchpoint wheel, determined that the way an employee greets a customer makes a critical impression. Then changes were instituted to make the message and manner of the customer greeting more brand-appropriate.

By taking such a comprehensive and systematic approach to improving the customer experience, you can ensure all of the pieces come together to translate your brand vision into reality.

All of the tools and approaches described above facilitate true brand integration and solid brand alignment. Applying them with your people, in your communications, and throughout all of your restaurant touchpoints will help bridge the disconnect between your advertising and the in-restaurant experience.

So in the place of the sound of advertising dollars flushing down the toilet, you hear the music of everyone and everything singing from the same choir book.

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