

Marketing Is Losing Its Mojo

Social media and analytics are important tools for marketers, but they're no substitute for big ideas

June 7, 2010

-By Denise Lee Yohn

Two recently published data points have me worried. The first is from a report by CMO.com on "The 10 Most-Read Articles for Q1 2010." Eight out of the top 10 articles read by the site's audience of senior marketing execs were about social or digital media, including stories entitled "The CMO's Guide to the Social Media Landscape" and "How CMOs Will Harness Digital Platforms in 2010 to Forever Change the Way Consumers Interact With Brands."

The second concerning factoid was reported by the CMO Council. Per the organization's fourth annual "State of Marketing Report," customer analytics are the top priority among CMOs. Sixty-two percent of the surveyed senior marketing execs said this year their focus will be on analyzing customer data to improve segmentation and targeting, 46 percent on investing in digital demand generation and online relationship building, and 44 percent on better qualifying and tracking lead conversion.

All this focus on social media and analytics seems to be sucking the creativity out of marketing. Time was, brands developed big ideas and delivered and communicated them in unique and creative ways. Now it seems marketers are only interested in tactics and metrics.

Where is today's equivalent of Apple's groundbreaking "1984" spot? Or of the classic "Think Small" print ads from VW? Certainly media and communications have changed, so a big TV spot or newspaper campaign probably isn't the right approach for transformational marketing. But lately it seems the pursuit of breakthrough marketing creativity has taken a backseat to work on more predictable and achievable efforts.

This is a serious threat to marketing's ability to drive business growth. While there's no question that social media includes some very powerful new communications platforms, we must not confuse tools with content. At the end of the day, the effectiveness of marketing is based on representing well the brand identity and positioning.

This social media myopia is also concerning because the platforms are changing so rapidly that reading about how other companies have used them can be irrelevant. As recently as a year ago, all a brand had to do was show up on Twitter and the company was heralded as being a leader in the field. Now consumers' expectations are dramatically higher and they're continually evolving.

If we want truly breakthrough marketing, we need to stop reading the same social media articles everyone else is reading, stop going to the same conferences everyone is attending, stop following and friending the same gurus as everyone else is fixated on, and stop using the best practices of the same companies everyone else is trying to imitate.

Instead we should open ourselves up and expose ourselves to new and different inputs -- engaging in novel cultural experiences, studying various fields of academic and scientific exploration, or simply surrounding ourselves with unusual people and things. A richer, more diverse mental canvas serves as fertile ground for marketing creativity.

We also need to first think "what," then "how." Carpenters don't study their toolboxes to come up with ideas for furniture to make. Composers don't begin writing symphonies by identifying the instruments that will play them. So marketers shouldn't start with social media tools and then try to create a brand idea that lends itself to the platform.

And we should manage marketing with a growth mind-set. Of course we should engage in some activities and allocate some dollars toward budget

line items that lower the costs of doing business or enable us to do what we do better; but we should channel the greater proportion of our resources and attention to driving new growth.

Most analytics are used to uncover how to improve the efficiency of marketing activities -- for example, how to segment customers into more discrete, more discriminated groupings in order to make targeting more efficient. Or how to track lead generation efforts, so those activities are less wasteful.

Analytics also usually measure performance relative to an established competitive set, so they point to our current standing and future opportunities within the served market.

These analytics are useful but they're unlikely to lead to transformative marketing efforts which truly drive new sales and grow the business. Marketing operations should be less about data, more about insights -- our tools should produce fewer measured steps, more creative leaps. Certainly this is more risky than what we're doing today. All of the buzz about social media makes it a logical and defensible foray. And who can argue with producing more and better data?

In this tough economic era, perhaps the threat of more financial pain has replaced breakthrough ideas with incremental improvements, and stand-out campaigns with mediocre ones. That may explain it, but it doesn't make it any less concerning.

Marketing mediocrity isn't acceptable; it's an oxymoron.

Denise Lee Yohn is a San Diego-based brand consultant who has worked with companies like Sony, Frito-Lay and Jack in the Box.

