

Brandwidth

Increasing the power of your brand to generate sales in the face of business marketing change

One in a series dedicated to the proposition that change is more than worth embracing.

It's worth cultivating.

Because, despite its challenge, if you play your innovations right, you can take advantage of change. Before it has a chance to take advantage of you.

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Brand blasphemy

If you're having trouble getting customers and prospects involved in your brand, you're not alone.

The conventional methods for developing brands are so old-fashioned, inward-looking and aspirational they don't fit with what's going on. And what's going on is nothing short of a revolution in business communications.

In this new paradigm, conventional, inside-out branding methods couldn't be more full of it if they were Porta-Potties at Lollapalooza.

It's a whole new world out there.

Products are no longer sold. They are bought.

That's because your customers and prospects now control not only the communications and information gathering process, they pretty much define and control the purchase process itself.

As a result, they determine what constitutes value in the things they buy. And these days that goes way beyond what it used to.

Along with enabling speed, technology and connectivity, they're redefining value beyond products and services to offerings that fuse both with information and emotional assurance to create new kinds of brand equity.

If you'd like to learn more about these revolutionary paradigm shifts and their effect on business branding, ask for a copy of the Mobium e-book *Shift This*.

What's wrong with this picture?

Yet with all this shifting, the way business-to-business brands are developed hasn't changed.

You know the scenario: Brand consultants sweep in, interview 50 senior managers and everybody with a "C" in their title, four good customers, no prospects and few if any front-line employees or stakeholders.

The net result is usually a logo, a theme line, a truckload of PowerPoint printouts, a lot of incestual information and very little insight into what the brand is or how it can be of value to different market groups and customers.

Oh yeah, the market

You remember the market? That's where they actually buy or choose not to buy the brand. That's where the brand actually generates income flows and long-term assets. And now that customers and prospects are in charge of the purchase process, it's the source of brand leverage.

Beware of consultants bearing Band-Aids®

Which is exactly why the old-paradigm approach to branding doesn't work anymore in business markets. Because its communications output is so broad, general and inward-looking it isn't relevant enough to customers' and prospects' buying needs to resonate with them.

In fact, your customers' and prospects' needs have about as much chance of being served by this old-paradigm approach as a loud Texan does by a French waiter.

That's why the world has been treated to such compelling business branding ideas as, "we work with you." Or how about, "behind every company." And of course that highly distinctive, "innovative, integrated solutions partner."

Consider an approach that revolves around customer and prospect perceptions from the beginning.

These are just a few of the themes developed by conventional branding approaches that we've been asked to make meaningful in some way to the market.

So here's your first clue

If you've got to translate your brand promise to make it meaningful to customers' and prospects' needs when they make a buying decision, you've got a problem.

And when customers and prospects control things, you've got a problem so deep, dark and black it could suck all the light out of Las Vegas and still have enough black left over to provide a lifetime supply of turtlenecks to the Yale University English Department.

Whether you're building a new brand, repositioning an existing brand or trying to make an old brand work better in a new business environment, we have a suggestion.

Start with the market

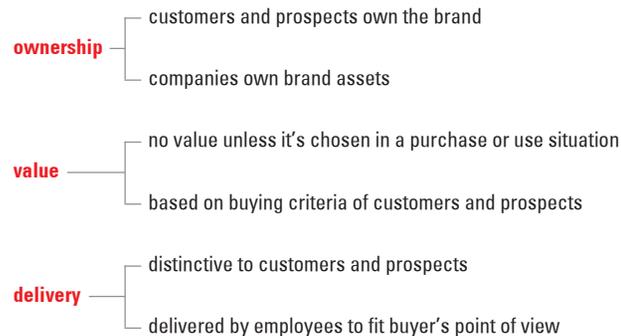
Consider an approach that revolves around customer and prospect perceptions from the very beginning. And then use that point of view to align employee expectations within your organization as well as management's vision for the brand.

Three brand principles

In this new paradigm, there are three branding principles that you might want to consider as laws.

Like the law of gravity, principles have always existed. They are always in force whether you choose to recognize them or not. And they will affect the outcome of all your efforts whether or not you intend them to.

In other words, a principle is what goes you in the butt in Pamplona when you dress up like Topo Gigio and run in front of a bunch of angry bulls down a street that's narrower than Newt Gingrich's mind.



You don't own the brand

The first principle of business branding is that you don't really own the definition of your brand.

You own the revenue streams and long-term assets that come from the brand. But customers own the brand.

They own it because each one of them puts the brand together for themselves in their minds and hearts based on all the information, impressions, interactions and experiences they have with the brand.

Your customers do

And if you don't want a bull up your butt, you should chew on that idea like Bob Dole gumming a wad of saltwater taffy.

So let's get our roles straight, Sparky.

Companies create brands, but customers and prospects own the brand. Companies create brand identities, but customers and prospects are the ones who give brands imagery, meaning and emotion.

Companies have a vision for where they want brands to go, but customers and prospects are the ones who will allow the brand to go there or not. Based on the meaning of the brand in their minds, they will determine if the brand can go where management wants it to. And they are the ones who will either take it there or keep it from getting there.

Whether you like it or not, in this new world where customers and prospects control information, communication, value definition and the buying process, they own the brand to a degree they never have before.

Value is in the purchase

The second business branding principle is that brands have value only if customers and prospects are willing to favor them over other brands in a purchase or use situation.

Again, in a world where customers and prospects control things, this is a real problem for aspirational brands. In fact, if you're stuck with an company-centric brand in this new environment you're going to be sadder than Bob Vila's neighbor trying to sleep in.

A brand is only distinctive if customers and prospects perceive and believe that it truly is.

That's because they are by definition inward-looking brands that are created by companies who believe they can determine what is of value and that they can establish it simply by repetitiously telling people what to believe.

Pull your head out of your aspirations

In other words, if you want to create a brand around the promise of feeding the hungry children in China, you better be sure that feeding hungry children is on your prospects' minds when they are making a buying decision.

Better to find out what customers and prospects look for when they buy. And which of their criteria are the most important to them. How they perceive your brand on each of these key attributes. And how you compare with competitive brands in their minds.

Without this kind of listening to the market you can't build a brand of maximum value in this new-paradigm world.

Distinct but deliverable

The third branding principle is that a brand, by definition, must be distinctive from other brands or it isn't really a brand at all. And that distinction must be deliverable.

In other words, you have to stand for something unique in people's minds, but you also have to keep your promises. And if you don't, your credibility will be stretched thinner than the elastic in Roseanne Barr's G-string.

A powerful brand is the internalized sum of all impressions received by customers and prospects and confirmed by their interactions with the brand at each point of contact. Those impressions and experiences result in a distinctive position in their minds.

Distinctive is the operative word.

You and your company don't get to decide whether or not your brand is distinctive. A brand is only distinctive if customers and prospects perceive and believe that it truly is. And a brand is powerful only if its perceived distinction relates directly to important criteria that customers and prospects use to make a buying decision.

Being distinctive

So to be truly distinctive in this new paradigm, your brand will have to meet several pretty specific requirements:

- It must be different in a way that is important and valued by customers and prospects.
- It must be committed to providing certain emotional and functional benefits that customers and prospects value.
- It must encapsulate those benefits into a meaningful promise to customers and prospects.
- It must consistently deliver its promise and deliver on its commitment both functionally and emotionally.

Delivering those expectations is a way of life. It's not about a name or logo or theme line. Or even about communications or marketing. It's about passion, organizational commitment and a unique promise that gets fulfilled every day.

In other words, you can't treat a brand promise the way your mom treats the good china. There's never an occasion special enough to actually use it, although you can take it out and look at it every once in a while.

Branding is as much about alignment of your people, processes and operations as it is about communications.

Brand promises have to be used every day.

And in reality they get used or misused everyday at every brand contact. And that happens chiefly through employees.

Yeah, so?

Employees have always delivered business brands.

What's different about delivering brands in this new marketing paradigm is that you or your company don't get to decide how to deliver the brand.

Customers and prospects decide how they want their brands delivered because they own the brand in their minds. And they now own the communications, information and purchase process. as well. That gives them all the power.

Customers and prospects decide if you deliver

So if the brand is delivered in a way that does not compute with their perceptions and expectations, in their reality it really hasn't been delivered at all.

Which means that your employees will have to understand how customers and prospects view the brand based on their buying criteria before your employees can deliver it.

Not only that, but they'll have to deliver it at each point of contact in the same way customers and prospects understand the brand. Not the way your employees do.

You're out of alignment, buddy

Compared to your employees's point of view, customer expectations may be higher than the entire first row at Reggae Sunsplash 2009. Or at least, they may be different.

In this new paradigm-shifting world, branding is as much about alignment of your people, processes and operations as it is about communications. But it requires integrated communications both outside and inside the company to align market perceptions and expectations with the organization's ability to deliver the brand on the customer's and prospect's terms.

Brand communications thus becomes simultaneous internal and external communications that are tied together to align customer/prospect perceptions with employee delivery. Without it, the two sides become so mistrustful of each other that they make Lawrence Harvey in "The Manchurian Candidate" look like Papa Smurf.

You need some culturalizing

This kind of simultaneous communications (we call it brand culturalization) is the key element that allows the customer and the company to come together. This integrated, inside and outside communications is the glue that holds buyers and sellers together over time.

In the not too distant future, it will be the basis for relationships in which buyer and seller agree to exchange information for the benefit of both. Unlike traditional customer relationships, these global relationships will be a continuous give-and-take among all parties. It will be a relationship of shared values.

But before we get to brand nirvana and join together in a big group hug, let's deal with some here-and-now realities.

Integrated Business Branding

A holistic approach

Trying to cover all the internal and external bases necessary to develop a truly powerful business brand at the point of sale in shifting market paradigms isn't easy.

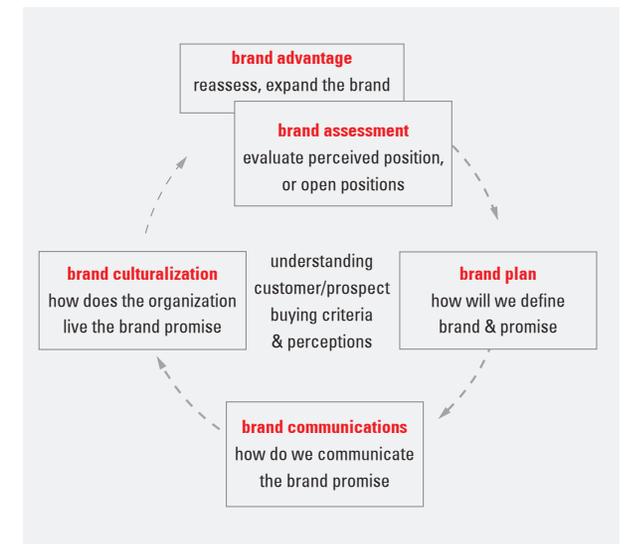
You need a holistic approach, but at the same time, you need modules that deal with brands at different development stages and with unique branding issues.

Holistic components

Without such a flexible approach, trying to deal with the ever expanding internal-external complexity is like being stuck in a never-ending traffic jam in mid-August in a New York taxicab with no air conditioning and a radio that only gets the All-Rosie Perez, All-the-Time station.

Integrated Business Branding is a holistic, five-component process to building and expanding powerful business-to-business brands. Each component is based on understanding your customers' and prospects' functional and emotional buying criteria as well as their perceptions of their brand choices.

It consists of brand assessment research that tries to uncover unique buying insights, defining and describing the brand's unique value based on those insights and communicating that differentiating value outside to the market and inside the organization to help it deliver that unique value as customers and prospects define it.



The methodology has been designed to identify the critical success factors, strengths, weaknesses and openings that may effect the brand's performance.

Brand assessment

The brand assessment process objectively evaluates the brand's perceived position or open positioning opportunities based on customer and prospect buying criteria, it also measures the degree of consensus within the organization concerning the brand compared to market perceptions.

It is designed to assess key aspects of the brand's image, current business and industry trends and to identify the critical success factors, strengths, weaknesses and openings that may effect the brand's performance.

Purpose:

- Correctly identify current brand perceptions and opportunities from customer/prospect and stakeholder points of view.
- Gain executive-team consensus on the current brand position and corporate brand goals.
- Identify employee perceptions of the brand and expectations of delivering it.
- Discover brand opportunities that relate to buying criteria and brand perceptions as well as the perceptions of competitors.

Process:

- Conduct and analyze customer/prospect research that defines the buying process, criteria, concerns, competitive frame and brand perceptions.
- Conduct and summarize management interviews.
- Conduct and analyze employee surveys.
- Develop gap analysis between customer/prospect perception and management's and employee's perception of the brand or brand direction.
- Review the business environment, marketing strategies, as well as market and competitive trends.
- Execute and evaluate a customer transaction analysis with management.

The brand promise is the essence of both functional and emotional benefits.

Brand plan

The chief role of the brand plan is to formulate a powerful brand positioning, promise and value proposition.

The brand promise is the essence of both functional and emotional benefits that current and prospective customers can expect to receive from experiencing the brand's value offering. It incorporates the customer/ prospect point of view discovered in the brand assessment phase. And it reflects it in the heart and soul of the brand.

MindScansm perceptual maps are used to identify important buying criteria and the brand's competitive strongholds and open positioning opportunities. These positioning opportunities are bundled together to form a distinctive position that differentiates the brand based on customer and prospect buying criteria.

The plan also develops the supporting architecture of the brand, including brand attributes, personality, brand hierarchies and delivery, as well as naming and nomenclature systems if necessary.

Purpose:

- Leverage brand opportunities discovered in phase one.
- Articulate a meaningful, market-based brand promise.
- Develop a long-term brand value proposition, position, attributes and personality from a customer/prospect purchase criteria perspective.
- Create the architectural building blocks for the brand.

Process:

- Answer the fundamental brand imperatives:
 - What business is the brand in?
 - What differentiates the brand's value offerings (products/services) from competitors?
 - What is the unique value that the brand offers to meet the distinct needs its customers?
- Develop brand imperatives, strategies, positioning, delivery, contact points and moments of truth.
- Define the brand attributes, architecture and elements.

Positioning primer

If you'd like descriptions of the unique branding processes used to create effective brand plans, here you go:

MindScansm analysis

MindScan perceptual mapping is used to identify the important buying criteria and the brand's competitive strongholds and open positioning opportunities. These positioning opportunities are bundled together to form a distinctive position that differentiates the brand based on customer and prospect buying criteria.

Positioning dimensions

Defines the unique position of the brand, in seven dimensions through a simple two-sentence statement. The dimensions include a definition of the business the brand is in, who it appeals to, what they look for, what the product is positioned against, what differentiates it and the overriding benefit to prospects.

Trajectory positioning matrix

This proprietary model projects core business changes that might affect a brand. Business aspects (such as possible changes in a product, product line extensions, distribution, selling channels, vertical markets served, and audiences) are evaluated against the brand's value proposition, brand promise and attributes to determine when a new brand scheme is necessary. This analysis is done in the formative stages of a brand plan to ensure that the brand developed is broad enough to account for future business changes and scenarios.

Brand attribute structure

Defines the specific components of the brand, including its core heritage, its capability/feature/benefit attributes, its emotional attributes, its differentiating components and its personality. This gives creative teams a firm understanding of what makes up the brand and its image, and provides a base for the consistent communication of the brand in all media.

Brand contact matrix

Identifies all points of contact that customers and prospects have with the brand (some inherent in the process of doing business, others created) and defines what kind of brand message is best communicated at that contact point. This tool also allows you to evaluate and prioritize each contact's impact on buying and its impact on customer relationship building.

Brand delivery

Focuses on how the brand promise will be organized across corporate and division levels and ultimately driven down into group product/service messages. It ensures that group messages leverage the brand and that the brand has relevance and power at the level where products and services are bought.

Brand engine

Aligns all aspects of what is said about the brand (communications) with what the brand does (delivery) and how its performance (how well it does what it says) is confirmed by others. This exercise ensures that the brand messages (ads, literature, etc.) and brand marketing (pricing, distribution, customer service, etc.) reinforce one another.

An integration model assigns specific functions to specific media and content.

Integrated brand communications

The purpose of an integrated brand communications program is to convert all the input from the brand assessment and plan phases into a unique, compelling creative buying concept that unifies all brand communications and moves customers and prospects through all phases of the purchase process.

The plan defines measurable communications objectives and strategies, establishes an integration plan that assigns specific functions to specific media and content maps that assign messages to different media. A complete media plan is also developed in this phase.

The creative concept phase of the brand communications plan includes proposed executions of key media vehicles shown as headline/visual concepts.

Purpose:

- Define how the brand will be communicated to customers, prospects and stakeholders.
- Provide measurable benchmarks for brand success.
- Create the concepts, appeals and incentives that will integrate all brand communications and move prospects through the purchase process.
- Create memorable and compelling brand messages that engage customers and prospects in meaningful dialogue and interaction based on their buying criteria.

Process:

- Define brand communications opportunities, role, objectives, strategy, audiences and brand messages.
- Develop an integration model that assigns functions to each media to move customers and prospects through all stages of the buying decision process.
- Develop creative objectives, strategies and tactics around a compelling creative buying concept that unifies all media.
- Evaluate media options, plan, schedule and execute the brand's creative concept in each medium.

The important thing is to communicate to employees the meaning of the brand from the customer's and prospect's viewpoint.

Brand culturalization

Culturalization addresses two internal communication issues. It translates the brand story and identity into communications vehicles that explain the meaning of the brand to employees in terms of their everyday actions.

It also gives employees the information, guidance and feedback they need to deliver the brand as customers and prospects understand it.

The employee survey conducted in the assessment phase is used to determine the degree of change and the direction of training and information to be given in each functional area of the company. Based upon this information, an internal communications plan is developed to determine the messages and the existing internal media and new media that will be integrated into the program. Company intranets, sales force bulletins, interactive training and news vehicles are a few of the possibilities.

The important thing is to communicate to employees the meaning of the brand from the customer's and prospect's viewpoint in a way that interactively involves the workforce in the brand on an ongoing, grass roots basis.

Purpose:

- Ensure that all employees and brand partners understand the essence of the brand and follow the same roadmap in order to differentiate the brand in customers' and prospects' minds.
- Provide employees with key brand information, direction and feedback that will involve them in the brand and help them deliver the brand promise as customers and prospects view it.

Process:

- Describe the brand's essence, promise and meaning to customers and prospect groups in a narrative, highly visual style that will serve as an involving reference for employees and brand partners.
- Specify brand and graphic standards as well as identity guidelines for applying the brand mark.
- Define internal communications objectives, strategies, audiences and messages.
- Develop an integration model that incorporates existing internal communications vehicles and unique new ways to involve employees interactively in the brand.

Changes in the market may create opportunities for new value offers which in turn generate new branding opportunities.

Brand advantage

After the first round of development and launch, program results and audience perceptions are monitored. In essence, the brand is reassessed. And the findings of this reassessment drive revisions to the brand plan, the communications plan and brand culturalization.

Brand advantage is the transitional phase of the branding process. It links the executional phases of the program back to the planning/revision phases through benchmark metrics which track how the brand is being perceived by its stakeholders. These are usually incremental adjustments.

When combined with internal databases, these metrics can be expanded to establish financial ROI measurement of the program and predictive models of the communications investment in customers and potential customers.

In addition to incremental adjustments, strategic branding options are evaluated to leverage the existing brand situation and market opportunities into greater value.

Changes in the market may create opportunities for new value offers (product/service changes) which in turn generate new branding opportunities. These strategies might include things like brand extensions, brand alliances and partnerships, emerging channel branding opportunities and e-commerce branding.

Purpose:

- Monitor the progress of brand equity, associations and perceptions in the marketplace.
- Use these measures to enhance the brand.
- Innovate and expand the value of the brand.

Process:

- Replicate the original research and MindScan analysis at planned intervals.
- Analyze movement of metrics and adjust brand and communications plans to enhance the brand.
- Evaluate brand expansion strategies against the trajectory positioning models from the brand plan.
- Develop and aggregate databases and analyze financial return on investment.

Listening for customer value

B-to-b marketers are spending millions on brands that have as much chance of reaping rewards as Jimmy Swaggert has getting backstage at a Marilyn Manson concert.

Most of the business messages and brands out there in the marketplace don't take into account what prospects are really buying, what they're interested in hearing and what they already think of the marketer's offering.

Instead, business branding is overpopulated with messages that are so inward-focused they amount to little more than companies telling themselves how great they are.

Of course, the awful truth is that that doesn't matter.

Welcome to the land of me, myself and I

All that really counts out there is what your customers and prospects think.

Because they own your brand. They control information, communication and the purchase process. And most importantly, they make the buying decision.

So even though statements like "America's largest whatever" or "the industry's premier what-cha-ma-call-it" may warm the hearts of your management, they mean very little to your prospects. (Except, perhaps, conceit.)

In other words, they are irrelevant ideas.

They are, in fact, corporate belches. Loud noises which no one is particularly waiting to hear. And aren't much impressed with once they have.

Pull my finger

In fact, at this very moment, thousands of business marketers all over the planet are devising sophisticated strategies to tell prospects all the things they (the marketers) want them (the prospects) to know about their (the marketer's) products.

Unfortunately, these are seldom the things that prospects are interested in hearing.

So they (the prospects) don't. They ignore them (the messages and the marketers).

Wrapped up somewhere in that mess of mismatched messages, expectations and beliefs are two implications for business-to-business marketers.

Value, value, who's got the value

The first is that eventually you're going to have to put anything you want to communicate to customers and prospects in terms of what's in it for them. And you can't find out how to do that unless you listen to them.

But, in the process, you must also delineate a position for your brand that's relevant to the way your customers and potential customers see their businesses. Not the way you view yours. And you can't do that unless you listen to them.

The purpose of this exercise is to disengage the corporate mouth long enough to let your market speak to you.

Align what you sell with what they buy

Finding out what buyers value most when they make buying decisions is vital whether you want it to be or not. And it's vital no matter what you sell. Or more accurately, what they buy. Even if it's one of those amazing, handy-dandy, super knives that can saw through a suspension bridge and still do delicate radial keratotomy eye surgery.

A business software client of ours believed that they were selling sophisticated geodemographic computer mapping programs to marketers. But the marketers they were selling it to, we discovered, didn't see it that way.

Your back end may be out of alignment

To them, their job was not about making maps. Their job was to make decisions. So they weren't particularly interested in buying sophisticated, hi-tech mapping software. But they were very interested in buying "decisionware."

Simply put, the primary role of an integrated brand or communications plan should be to align what you say and sell with what your audience wants to buy and hear about.

An amazing space-age discovery

There's a way to get to that. It's an amazing space-age technology we call Shut Up and Listen.

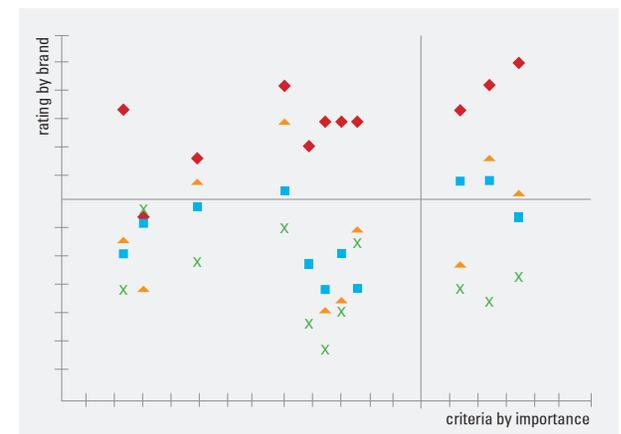
And when you listen for value, it can do some amazing things to align your front-end and your back-end.

The purpose of this exercise is to disengage the corporate mouth with its highly developed belching apparatus long enough to let your market speak to you.

But speak to you in such a way that you understand what customers and prospects value most when they make a buying or use decision. And that includes understanding how they view your brand and your value offerings as well as their perceptions of their other brand purchase options.

Scan a mind

We've developed a process that we call MindScanning. It defines the criteria buyers use when making a purchase and how important each attribute is to their decision. The MindScan also shows how buyers perceive each competitor's performance on each important criterion. We use this map to identify positioning opportunities, develop the most audience-relevant messages and set brand network objectives and measurements.



It also gives you a good idea of the kinds of messages and information that will engage customers in a dialogue that's of value to them.

Answer eight key questions

Whatever research technique you use to listen with, it should answer some basic value questions.

Most importantly, it should answer them strictly from your customers' and prospects' points of view. That means without any prompting from you. Remember, my friend, it's called Shut Up and Listen.

1. What is the buying process they go through to identify sources, evaluate them and approve purchase decisions?
2. Who is involved in this process and what role does each play in each stage of the buying process?
3. What problems, concerns or challenges do they face that an offering like yours could help with?
4. What specific criteria or attributes do they use to make a buying decision? (Easy, surface answers like price, quality or service don't count. Dig deeper into their meanings. And look for connections to both functional and emotional criteria.)
5. How important is each criterion to them?
6. What/who do they consider to be competitive buying options to your brand?
7. How do they rate each competitor's performance on their most valued functional and emotional buying criteria?
8. How do they rate your offering's performance?

Discover value-based market segments

If you do it right, you can slice and dice the information you've collected in a lot of different ways to aggregate customers and prospects and market segments into value segments based on their common behavioral values.

Slice, dice, segment, aggregate and julienne fries in a snap

You can look at what's important to different audiences (functional job titles). And you can identify differences in criteria between buyers, influencers and deal-killers. Not to mention unique criteria to different markets.

This is the first step in developing messages that will resonate with different audiences and different markets at different stages of the purchase process.

It also gives you a good idea of the kinds of messages and information that will engage your customers and prospects in a dialogue that's of value to them.

Focus on helping them solve their problems and empower them and their businesses around your brand and its offerings.

Get brand direction

Careful analysis of this information will also uncover growth opportunities for your brand in its category.

You'll begin to see where your customers and prospects are willing to take your brand. Based on the definition of the brand they've assembled in their heads, where can you extend the brand? What are the brand limits? What are the opportunities left open by competitive perceptions?

These open opportunities are based on the customer and prospect beliefs about your brand category. And the unmet needs and wants most valued by customers and prospects that you can address. That includes those that competitors may already be talking about in their communications but have not seeded in your audiences' minds.

Answering these questions helps you build a position that addresses the issues that your customers and prospects value most. And as a result, your brand and your messages will resonate with buyers at the moment of truth. When they make a buying or use decision.

Define your real competitive frame

The process also forces you to look at competitive brands from customers' and non-customers' points of view.

That's important because they may define your competitive frame much differently than you do. Whether you consider the brands they identify to be your competitors or not, you might want to rethink your frame.

In a world where customers and prospects control information, communication and the buying process, it's in your best interest to think about things the way they do. And that includes how you define your own competitive set.

The process can also help you develop new product/service solutions ("value offers" as we like to call them) that you can deliver through your brand. These offers often include intangible things like special information, advice and community that can be bundled with your product or service to make your brand more valued and distinctive

Make me a value offer

Ultimately, the process can provide direction to help you change the relationship that you have with customers and prospects. You can more easily focus on helping them solve their problems and empower them and their businesses around your brand and its offerings.

This understanding of what makes up customer and prospect value from their point of view is the key ingredient in developing powerful integrated business brands.

Dialogue communications

building brands by listening, understanding and responding

Let's be brutally frank.
That's always fun and
appreciated.

After several decades of information manipulation, reality spinning and one-way monologues carefully crafted to tell people what to believe, most companies' emotional bank accounts with the people they serve are more overdrawn than an M.C. Escher doodle pad.

The disparity between what companies think they sell and what customers and prospects really buy is a giant gaping hole bigger than a George Sanders yawn while watching a fishing show hosted by Alan Greenspan.

Repetitious, interruptive, self-obsessed messages about how great your products are, as opposed to how you can solve customer problems, are about as popular as Marla Maples at a benefit screening of "The First Wives Club."

No wonder public opinion polls show that marketing and communications people have attained the status of a pork chop at the Wailing Wall.

Shift to the rescue

Fortunately for all of us, mega-shifts in practically all market dynamics are redefining the game.

Most of these alterations are driven by customers and prospects gaining control of information, communication and the purchase process. Which, believe it or not, is a huge opportunity for business marketers.

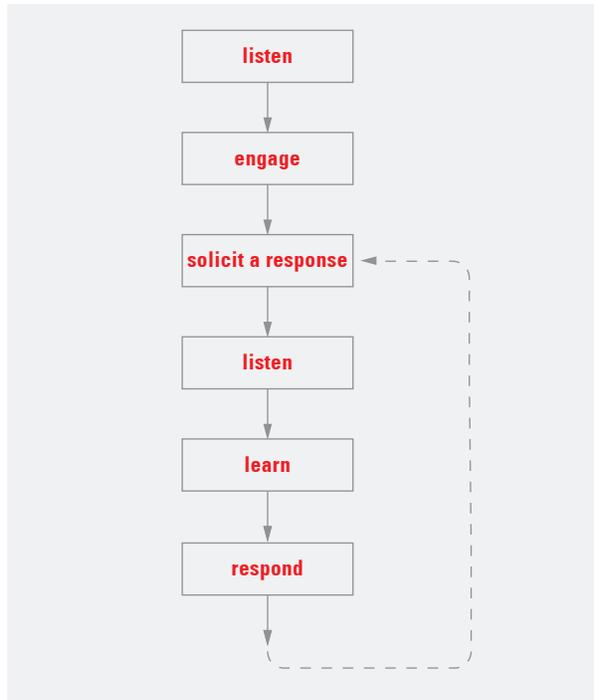
If understood, all this shiftiness gives business marketers and communicators an unprecedented opportunity to claim pivotal positions in their customers' value chains. Positions that go beyond even product/service offerings, into areas of value creation based on information, emotional support, connectivity and reciprocal relationships.

If you let it

In this new market order, listening, understanding and responding to customers' and prospects' information needs is how business marketers will establish their value positions with customers and drive sales from prospects.

We call the actions by which this listening, learning and responding takes place "dialogue communication."

And without this personal two-way communication, the chasm between you and your customers in this new paradigm, will grow so large it will make the Grand Canyon look like the space between Japanese rail commuters.



Dialogue as process

In its simplest form, dialogue communication consists of listening to customers and prospects, engaging them in a creative way that makes them want to talk to you, soliciting a response, listening to their reply and responding in kind with additional information, advice, answers or questions.

Step one: Shut up and listen

As you can see, listening is a vital activity in several phases of the dialogue process.

It includes listening to customers and prospects before you initiate brand communication so that you understand what's relevant to them and how they'd like to be communicated with. That's the shut up part.

This initial listening is not difficult to do. You ask (through research, Web surveys ,etc.). They tell you.

Step two: Engage them

Based on this information, the next step is to engage them. It's kind of like asking someone to dance. You don't just grab them and begin the gyrations as many so-called "direct" communicators and the practitioners of CRM do.

No indeed, Sparky.

Tests conducted in singles bars and clubs around the world have proven that you can dramatically improve your chances if you engage them in a little conversation first. So they have a sense for who the heck you are.

These "engagement" messages have conventionally been called brand messages. Of course, we don't believe you can separate brand messages from any other kind of message. To us, all messages are brand messages. But for the sake of argument, let's call them messages designed to build awareness, familiarity and preference.

The fine art of soliciting

At this stage of the dialogue, messages don't have to be personalized. But they should solicit a response. They should ask for a contact, ask a question, ask for a reply, make an offer. You can direct the reader to a Web site where you can ask them questions, get their opinions, involve them in your products interactively. You can reach them through social networks and online communities who share their interests and problems.

These mechanisms for conversation must be built into your overall integrated brand and communications strategy and plan. Each forum for conversation may come at a different point in the purchase process. However, each forum must also have mechanisms imbedded in the communications vehicle itself to initiate a dialogue.

But engagement goes beyond vehicles.

Engagement is about emotion and empathy. It's about developing a customer/prospect point of view that is delivered in a voice that makes people want to talk to you.

Ultimately, engagement is about creative execution.

No matter what media you use to continue this conversation, they'll have to function interactively.

Step three: Listen and respond

Of course, once someone acts, asks a question, answers a question, asks for more information or responds to your engaging solicitation in any way, the hard part begins.

If you don't do it right, your responses will be received with all the enthusiasm of Matt Helm at a radical feminist poetry reading. And you don't want that.

So you have to be prepared to respond immediately to specific requests or questions with personal, specific replies delivered in whatever form they want them.

But even more important than that, you have to have mechanisms in your communications to listen for their responses and learn from them.

Having done that, you're now in a position to initiate other highly relevant communications with them based on what you've learned about them.

By the way, no matter what media you use to continue this conversation, they'll have to function interactively.

What constitutes a dialogue

To qualify as dialogues, these communications must:

- Offer personalized messages based on criteria such as name, job function, firmographics, customer purchase history or customer behavior.
- Answer specific questions posed by customers and prospects based on their profiles.
- Deliver information requested in the form (media) requested by your audience.
- Occur in as close to real time as the response media they've requested will allow.
- Ask questions of customers and prospects and request a response that allows the brand to provide additional, more relevant information or engage in an ongoing conversation.
- Diagnose a situation and suggest remedies.
- Provide methods for customer/prospects to add their own information and opinions to a community and receive feedback from others.

To avoid being considered intrusive, a message must have an added value to the recipient.

Five requirements of dialogue

Beyond their structural characteristics, dialogue messages contain five intrinsic elements.

1: Value

Your customers and prospects aren't interested in having their business lives interrupted by your marketing messages. Believe it or not, they'd rather not have their voicemail bloated with your non-relevant telemarketing offers. Or their email inbox jammed with messages about you. Why, they're not even excited about continually being offered another line extension they don't think they need, but you do.

More and more, they resent these intrusive messages. And, as a result, they are creating more and more defense mechanisms against them.

But they are willing to be part of a dialogue if it is clear to them that you respect them and their time and that you have something of value to give them.

In other words, to avoid being considered intrusive, a message must have an added value to the recipient. It also has to be received when, where and in the form preferred by your customer or prospect. Unless the message contains something they perceive to be of value to them personally, chances are they'll reject it.

Value, by the way, includes much more than relevant product information. It also includes things like entertainment, status, empowerment information, job effectiveness and professional development.

2: Access

An essential aspect of dialogue communications is making it easy for people to contact your company at any time, from any place, for any reason.

The more ways they have to access your brand, the stronger their relationship will be. The easier it is for customers to get questions answered and problems dealt with, the easier it will be for the customer to develop a supporting brand relationship.

Easy accessibility, particularly at the time when a buying or use decision is being made or when there's a need for information, is an added value to customers and prospects. One that goes a long way to strengthen their relationship with the brand.

3: Human attention

Merely providing people with an 800 number, Web address or email contact does not qualify as response in the dialogue process. And as such, it builds a personal, emotional connection to your brand.

Response is providing a company representative or system that can listen to your customer or prospect, put the conversation into a context of their profile and history and stay with them throughout the dialogue.

The brand is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company.

4: Personal recognition

Of course, once someone is a customer, he or she likes to be personally recognized. That's one of the first steps in establishing a relationship.

In terms of communications, that means much more than addressing them by name or personalizing content. When a company gives you its business, they feel that a relationship has been established. Even if you see it as merely an "acquisition" or "transaction."

If you fail to recognize this perceived connection, then your customer will view the relationship as a weak one, not worthy of their loyalty. So it becomes incumbent on you to treat customers differently than the general market. Which means treating them individually and personally in the kind of information, emotional incentives and value offers that you make to them.

5: Brand reinforcement

If you have the impression that a dialogue is an ongoing, continuous, daily occurrence, then we've overstated things. Or you're living in another disconnected Shirley MacLaine universe somewhere.

Customers and prospects do not spend their days thinking about how they can break away for a few hours to talk with you over the Internet.

In reality, dialogues pop up now and then over time. When they need to. Where there is a need. When it's of value to customers and prospects. Not necessarily when it's convenient or efficient for you. But rather when they want them to occur. Because they're in control.

That means two things. Dialogues need to be reinforced. And conversations should revolve around the customer or prospect and their relationship with the brand.

The brand's the thing

The brand is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company. In their minds, they are communicating with the brand. It is the hook they have in their heads that categorizes and consolidates all these disparate interactions and conversations.

And one of the important benefits of broad-based awareness and familiarity building communications is its ability to reinforce existing relationships with people who have already bought your brand. In fact, studies have shown that the majority of ad readers are current customers.

Reinforcement of your brand image and promises as well as key functional and emotional buying criteria should be part of your dialogue strategy. It reduces buyer remorse and ties both customers and prospects closer to the brand in a way that makes them want to initiate dialogue.

The little mental wedgies

of integrated brand communications

The days of ad branding are gone. The Unique Selling Proposition is a thing of the past. The days of “one voice” integration are numbered.

Right now Rosser Reeves and David Ogilvy are spinning over in their graves so rapidly they’re thinking of hooking them up to a turbine to light up the Vegas strip.

The world is changing. And in a world where your customers and prospects have no time and little attention, and at the same time control information, communication and the buying process, the role of business branding and communications changes dramatically.

The power of mental migration

The opportunities for business marketers to take advantage of these changes are as overwhelming as George Kennedy without his Breath Assured.

In this new environment, integrated business branding and communications can go beyond their old, conventional roles of building brand awareness, familiarity and mere communications consistency.

They can create brand experience at each stage of your customers’ purchase process, not just brand exposure. And as such, they now have the power to turn people who have never heard of your company or brand into prospects then into buyers into customers into long-term brand advocates.

These migratory abilities result in real, measurable business outcomes, including increased revenue streams, expanded brand equity and accrued brand assets.

Truly integrated branding programs move prospects and customers through each step of the purchase process. From unawareness to awareness to knowledge to preference to conviction to evaluation to trial to purchase and then to repurchase and advocacy.

That is their real purpose in this paradigm-shifty world.

The fine art of goosing

They do it by goosing prospects along the way with the right amount of the right information (not all the information), the right benefits, the right offers, the right reminders and the right appeals to push them to the next stage.

Kind of like little mental wedgies that push people along quickly in the direction that you want them to go.

Each of these goosing components is targeted, of course, to reach the right influencers at the right time through the right media. So here are seven sample gooses (or geese) that you might want to keep in mind.

Later in the buying process, pay special attention to contact media.

Goose one: let them know you're there and can deliver

Woody Allen was right. At least 80 percent of success is just showing up.

And in this case, showing up means having consistent, broad-based communications going on at the right time. Which is whenever they need you.

In the early stages of the purchase process, messages should keep potential buyers informed that you're in business and able to deliver. This is a continuous process. Otherwise, the odds are pretty good they'll forget to ask for you when they really need something.

Goose two: establish contact

Contact as in contact cement.

Later in the buying process, pay special attention to contact media. These are media that have direct connections to your audience or that make it very easy for prospects to contact you. Social networking is a good example.

This does not mean a direct sales call. It means making it easy for people to get the kind of information they want, how and when they want it. Which at this early stage usually means without a sales rep attached.

In tactical terms, it means things like a truly interactive Web site, a single 800 number, a bounce-back with interactive closest dealer directions, a reply card, blogs, coupons, return emails or fax-back information.

Goose three: make a concrete offer

The idea is to build credibility, involvement and dialogue through some sort of action device and rationale. This is sometimes known as "a reason to believe."

In this stage of the purchase path, you must give prospects a reason to believe that your product or service offer can be relied on to deliver the brand promise or benefit. At the same time, you have to focus on ways of making it easier to buy from you than from your competitors.

Goose four: don't say it, be it

As prospects get closer to evaluation time, stop telling them what your brand will do for them and start showing them.

"Being it" is more than conventional tactics like sampling. Or product demonstrations. Or testimonials. Or case histories.

In this new age of business communications, it includes finding any excuse you can muster to get your prospects' hands on your brand. To experience it. Even if it's a computer simulation of the product. Or a spreadsheet program that can show the specific dollar-and-cents impact of your product on their business. "Being it" is interacting with cutaways of the product on the Internet.

Many of these purchase influencers are hidden inside the organization.

Goose five: information is our friend

Give qualified leads all of it you can.

Give them enough information to help them make up their minds about whether what you have to offer is what they want to buy. Enough information to give them every possible excuse and rationalization to act on the emotional brand decision they've probably already made.

When in doubt, give them more information. Even if most prospects won't read it all, some will. Some, in fact, will suck it all up faster than an Oreck in the hands of the guy from the movie "Shine."

They're the ones who will become your customers.

Goose six: help them sell their boss

Buyers have to sell too. If they're about to spend the company's money, chances are they must justify their decision to someone else.

Find out who that someone else usually is and build benefits for them into your communications in the latter stages of the purchase process. And while you are at it, make it easy for your prospect to get all those higher level benefits into their bosses hands.

Goose seven: sell the committee

The word's out. Companies are looking to consolidate their suppliers. They're outsourcing and downsizing their way to success. As a result, they want to simplify. They want to do business with fewer full-service vendors.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Now it's going to be easier to get more business from each account.

Contraire!

The fact of the matter is, every time a company moves to fewer full-service suppliers, the next step is the establishment of some sort of buying committee to ensure that the diverse needs of the organization are met.

Some of these people know little about you. You've probably never worked with them before, so they don't know what you stand for. Or what you do. Or even who the heck you are.

And to make things worse, your salespeople probably don't have access to many of them. Neither, we'll bet, does your finely tuned, pinpoint-targeted CRM database. Because many of these purchase influencers are hidden deep inside the organization. Unseen by your databases. Forgotten.

The committee as a clueless deal-killer

A new client of ours, who's as close as you can get to selling a commodity, has done a wonderful job of differentiating themselves. They've added integrated services so they can help their customers improve profitability all the way through the customer's value chain. They're right on track with the emerging trend in their industry for buying groups to look at the whole value process. Not just the procurement part.

Problem is, they only have access to purchasing managers.

The people who can really appreciate what they're doing and push the full-service purchase their way, like operations and marketing people, know little or nothing about them. Let alone how their integrated services can benefit each area represented on the buying committee.

You can also create special paths through your Web site to address each member's focus in the buying process.

This is called irony

And if it weren't for broad-based communications, it would be called stick-a-fork-in-us-'cause-we're-done.

In addition to broad-based media like trade publications and web sites aimed at specific job disciplines, there's also dialogue-oriented ways of reaching different members of the committee. Things like productivity seminars, road shows, sneak previews, trend readouts and events.

At the very least, you can be sure to include benefits that will resonate with each member's concerns in your literature. You can customize direct marketing packages and email efforts to them according to their job functions.

You can also create special paths through your Web site to address each member's focus in the buying process. Give them special information and tools that can help them deal with their area of responsibility.

If you'd like to know more about how brand communications can and should be integrated across all media, ask for a copy of the Mobium e-book entitled *Goosing*.

Creative execution

where brands go to die

So this guy goes into a business-to-business marketing conference for a shot of brand enlightenment. What does he get?

First, he's served a direct marketing process, masquerading as integrated brand communication, where the only contact tools are mail, phone and personal sales.

That's followed by an international guru with a nifty formula for global brand integration that sounds a heck of a lot like a public relations plan in disguise.

Sips of stupidity

Next on the menu is a guy with a foolproof method for building integrated brand communications programs based on response quotients.

If you want 90 percent brand building and 10 percent response, you put this device in this location on the piece. If you want 80 percent brand and 20 percent response you follow these handy-dandy instructions.

Amazing. Especially coming from a guy who couldn't create gas after a bean burrito dinner.

And if you're not disoriented enough by now, you can pick up a chaser at the registration table—a book called *Words That Sell*. This pithy little tome gives you all the time-tested phrases that "copywriters rely on to seduce audiences." All indexed by function from "snappy transitions" to the ever popular "enhancing company image."

Oh, don't forget the guys with the nifty presentation on integrated online branding. All you'll ever need is right there on the good old internet. To them branding is where you place the logo on the navigation template.

Have we all gone stark raving mad?

Is this what brand communications has come to? Piecemeal processes that impersonate integration? Do we really believe that God is in the instructions? That the checklist is the solution? That serving up a bunch of strategies is communicating the brand?

Not once in this pathetic formula fest was creative work examined. Apparently, it's not a factor in business branding. Heck, it was hardly mentioned. Except, of course, to say, "Creativity is inherent in brand communications."

What?

We've got news for you, Sparky

It's not.

In fact, when it comes to integrated business-to-business marketing and brand communications, it's not even close.

As everyone who actually does integrated branding programs day-in and day-out (as opposed to talking about them) knows, it's in the execution where most integrated communications fall apart. And don't kid yourself; they're falling apart all over the place.

Whether you like it or not, if your program fails to work creatively, you'll be back to square one on the strategic crash-and-burn game board.

It takes creative
impact to engage
people. To make them
want to talk to you.

Creativity: the first rule of engagement

Only in communications can you do all the up-front integrated strategy stuff perfectly and then watch it all go right down the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed. Or to involve the audience. Or get attention. Or get remembered.

The cruel reality is that no matter what you do strategically, no matter how good and integrated your process is, you're still going to have to compete with a zillion other rapidly disintegrating brand messages.

And if that's not bad enough, you're going to have to compete for an ever-shrinking span of attention and audience time in an ever-expanding universe of media.

Overcoming the triple-whammy

You have only two choices to overcome that triple-whammy. You can either repeat messages over and over again until they finally sink in. Or you can say them in such a fresh, surprising and relevant way people can't forget them.

You can either continue to send out interruptive, repetitive monologues. Or you can engage your customers and prospects in dialogue that is of value to them and their business. Engage them in a dialog that connects your brand with their buying needs.

Engage is the key word.

Engage your audience before your mouth

It takes creative impact to engage people. It takes creative impact to make them want to talk to you and focus their attention on what you can do for them.

In this new world where customers and prospects control information, communications and the buying process, engagement through creative impact is a lot more effective than repetitive messaging.

When you rely on repetition you not only waste money, you also lose valuable time. Without creative impact, your message is relegated to the slow seep of frequency.

Frequency is osmosis

Or evolution. You wait patiently for nature to take its course and for your messages to eventually seep in.

If they seep at all.

The fact of the matter is, in this new age of business communications, frequency is akin to waiting for the late Jimmy Stewart to recite the Mahabharata on the back of an arthritic tortoise in a hammock hung between two trees in the intensified gravity of the planet Jupiter.

In other words, it takes too damn long.

“If the idea doesn’t make some company executive’s sphincter lock up, than you’re probably not saying anything worth saying.”

In the meantime, a competitor can zip past you at the speed of light and get into your audience’s heads with a new idea or benefit before you. Or even take a position or attribute or point of differentiation away from you.

All they need is the right integrated strategy and the powerful engine of creative impact.

Creativity is lightning

Maybe it’s time to start measuring the effectiveness of your integrated communications and branding efforts by their impact instead of just their methodology and cost-per-thousand efficiency. And impact, my friend, is a direct result of how fresh, original and relevant your creative is.

Despite the tremendous communications and marketing shifts that are going on out there, people will always stop, notice, connect and pay attention to a message that’s fresh and direct and engaging and human.

Always.

Because people react strongly to something they’ve never seen or heard before.

But it's not for spineless weasels

Creating an integrated communications or branding program that stands out and has impact means running risks. There’s no way around it.

If an ad or direct marketing piece is provocative, interesting, intriguing and engaging, it will create an adverse comment or two along the way. Especially inside your company.

In fact, you can count on it. Somebody in your organization will become as nervous and jerky as The Incredible Mr. Limpet on a speedball.

That’s when you know you’ve got something

Mark this down. Make a poster of this and hang it on your wall: “If the idea doesn’t make some company executive’s sphincter lock up tighter than Windows 98 on overload, than you’re probably not saying anything worth saying.”

And when his or her sweat hits the fan, that’s the time to pull a Dennis Rodman and start getting aggressive on the offensive glass. Don’t go gentle into this bad night.

When people inside get nervous it usually means your communication is being direct. It’s taking a stand. It’s taking on an issue that resonates with an important segment of the market. It has power. Mostly because it’s not hiding behind the obscure, the obvious or the obtuse.

If you want to attract and keep customers out there in the integrated jungle, you have to concentrate on standing out.

Test a concept for impact

Creative impact comes from stating a relevant message in a way people have never considered before. In fact, you can test your next concept for impact:

Check your guts

1. Does it upset the status quo?
2. Does it question conventional thinking?
3. Does it take people by the shoulders and shake them?
4. Does it remind them of how they felt, feel or want to feel?
5. Does it force them to reexamine their attitudes? Does it challenge their assumptions?

Being on the receiving end of any one of those kinds of messages can be an unsettling experience. That's what makes them impactful. That's what makes them work.

The value of standing out

After you've lived in the integrated jungle for a while (as opposed to just talking about it) you learn that there are only two laws of survival.

If you don't want to be eaten alive, blend in.

If you want to attract a mate, stand out.

Unfortunately, most business branding and communication today is desperately trying to keep from being eaten. So it doesn't attract anything—except maybe flies when it dies.

More standing around than standing out

If you don't believe that, just peruse any of the current business-to-business media you'd like.

It's like thumbing through wallpaper samples. One message blending into another. Visual wallpaper full of unimaginative statistics. Or simple regurgitation of stark, uninvolved selling points that the company thinks will automatically sell the product by the weight of its pure logic.

In other words, communications that simply put the product on a pedestal and describe it, and wait and wait and wait for the world to beat a path to its door.

Why they're still waiting

There is a mistaken logic at work here. And it goes something like this: "If my program is like my competitors' (a euphemism for the curse of 'benchmarking') then I'll be considered a factor in the market and attract attention."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you want to attract and keep customers out there in the integrated jungle, you have to concentrate on standing out. In every medium. Not on blending in.

You have to concentrate on being creatively distinctive and engaging so that people want to talk to you. Not drab, dull and transparent so people ignore you and have no time for you.

If you don't, your integrated program will hit the dumper harder than the Dudley Boys at a Texas tag team cage match with table seating.

The changing brand voice

Whether you like it or not, your brand is now part of a very human conversation.

And thanks to the Web, the very sound of that conversation starkly contrasts with the monotonous, lifeless, self-centered drone coming from most business-to-business companies around the world.

From corporate-speak...

The problem is that companies have become more comfy with this inane, self-possessed, corporate-speak than Ed Begley, Jr. in an electric car on his way to a recycling center with a trunk full of empties.

In fact, they're so comfortable with it themselves they actually think that people on the outside (like customers and prospects) relate to their indecipherable babble.

We've got news for you, Skeeter.

People on the outside are more involved in their tans than they are in this weasly word play.

And in this new marketing/communications/branding paradigm, if your brand has even the aromatic hint of a belching weasel, you've got a problem.

...to corporate belching

Corporate belches consist of a mixture of meaningless mission statement mumbo jumbo, indecipherable acronyms technological jargon and the legalese and weasel words that companies hide behind. They are the inward mumbles of old world hierarchies that are more top-heavy than Pamela Anderson in a centrifuge.

And don't forget the strategy-talk that somehow turns communications objectives into copy that tells people what they should believe. This is particularly true of current integrated programs that are based on pretty good strategy but are self-destructing all over the place like a squadron of kamikaze pilots after a mail drop of Dear John letters.

In other words, belching weasels smell alot like all the stuff that Web-empowered, networked customers and prospects can see through in an instant. Because technology has enabled them to know more than you do, faster than you do. Especially about their brand choices.

As networked, market-community conversations grow, a new kind of brand voice is required.

Because compared to the emerging voice of real, human market conversations, typical business-to-business copy sounds and feels about as natural and spontaneous as a Jesse Helms bowel movement.

In contrast, these new market conversations offer people the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy.

What's more, these new voices are telling one another the truth based on their real experiences with the brand. Again, in stark contrast to the packaged corporate messages aimed at presenting that edited, finely polished version of reality that can generously be called the corporation's best-case scenario. Or it can be called bullshit.

In order to survive in this new age, a company and a brand must have a human voice.

...to the power of the human voice

Since the first markets, we, as human beings, seem to know intuitively when something spoken, written or recorded is sincere and honest. When it's trying to connect with our hopes and dreams. When it comes from one person's heart and mind instead of a synthesis of corporate-speak filtered through a myriad of English class editing, trimming, targeting, bullet pointing and legal machinations.

Survival of the humanist

There is a self-indulgent pomposity in what passes for business communications today. Missing is the voice, humor and simple sense of worth and honesty that characterizes person-to-person conversations.

But that will change. It has to.

Because in order to survive in this new age, a company and a brand must have a human voice. It must stand for something. It must mean something. And it must want to stand out, meet people and show that it's trying to understand those people.

Sayonara, “Four Ps”

For fifty years or so, business marketing, communications and branding have been directed by the “Four Ps.”

In fact, your marketing education was probably based on it. And more likely than not, you’ve used its point of view, if not its tenets, for direction every day of your working life.

It’s been a good ride, hasn’t it? So hey, let’s hear it for the “P”meisters—price, product, place and promotion.

Now let’s forget it.

Why the ride is over

Paradigms are shifting so fast they’re turning the venerated “Four Ps” into little more than a supercharged, gyroscopic hamster wheel chock full of frantic, well-coordinated actions that will get you absolutely nowhere.

You might as well have Ed Wood directing the action.

In this new marketplace, your customers and prospects hold most of the power. So your marketing and brand communications are going to have to follow their agenda.

New paradigm, new agenda, new point of view

And increasingly, their agenda will require you to relate to your audience through a bunch of different interrelated and interactive systems.

These systems (or forums, as we like to call them) include traditional and nontraditional media as well as unique hybrid vehicles that are linked, to one degree or another, to make it easy and desirable for your audience to access your messages. As opposed to being interrupted by them.

Most importantly, these forums run on the interaction of many different multidimensional dialogues. Not on highly controlled traditional marketing monologues.

So business communicators are going to have to change their tune faster than Elvis Costello on Saturday Night Live.

This is not a simple fluff-and-fold situation

Pulling off this change in communications priorities will be as difficult as finding a dry spot on Billy Idol’s futon.

Which means you’ll probably have to adopt a totally different mindset from the classic “Four Ps.” It means changing how to think about business marketing, branding and communications in a totally new world.

Because in this new paradigm, conventional business marketers and communicators will be little more than moths. And the “Four Ps” will be the porch light they’ll be slamming their heads against for another decade or two. Not because it affords any illumination anymore, but because it barely beats eating socks.

Sure, for a while we’re all going to be blustering and bumbling our way through this new marketing age with all the proficiency of Tennessee Tuxedo’s assistant Chummy. But one thing is for sure. A new paradigm requires a new set of marketing imperatives.

In your listening,
you must be willing
to learn. And then
act upon what you've
learned with a
response.

So here are five for starters. Yeah, we know. They're not as simple, zippy and easy to remember as PPPP. But then they're not related to bodily functions either.

New "P" one: listen and act

The key business question of this new age is, how quickly and effectively can you understand and respond to the needs and wishes of customers and prospects?

But the fact of the matter is most business marketers are not equipped for speed of response. Worse than that, most are oriented to talk. As in "Yap, yap, yap, isn't my product great, yap, yap, we're more than you think, yap, yap, yap."

Essentially they market by telling people what to think about their products. They're not oriented to listening to those people before, during or after they talk.

But listening is not enough either. In your listening, you must be willing to learn. And then act upon what you've learned with a response. A response that gives your customers or prospects the information, direction and advice they want and need, when, where, and how they'd like it.

In a marketplace where the marketer was in control, responsiveness was not very important. In the new, connected marketplace that requires interaction between parties, responsiveness is critical. In fact, its everything.

New "P" two: integrated resonance

Resonance has to do with how relevant your total brand and marketing program is to the person to whom it is being addressed. Not only in its message but in its timing.

This becomes a major issue when customers are expected and encouraged to access communications, not simply be interrupted by it. The more relevant messages are to the intended audience at different times in the purchase process, the more likely they are to access or accept them. Because they uniquely resonate with them.

But resonance is not just a branding or marketing issue. Nor is it only about information, messages and media. It is an emotional issue as well. And in this new paradigm, emotional support has value.

It has to do with engaging your audience on a visceral, human level at each point of contact. It involves creative empathy. It is as much about how something is said as it is what is said. It is about being real and human.

Being real and human and engaging leads to dialogue that is sought out by your customers and prospects because the information and emotional support that is the substance of that dialogue is of unique value to them.

Over time, dialogue and resonance develop helping, reciprocal relationships and thought leadership.

New paradigm brands allow customers and prospects to make decisions based on experience and recommendations from peers and influencers.

New “P” three: access

The challenge for brand communications in this new marketplace is making the company and its expertise available when customers or prospects want to receive it, not necessarily when you want to provide it.

The challenge for the whole corporation, not just marketers, is communicating value offerings when the buyer wants to buy, not necessarily when you want to sell.

These two dynamics change many of the old branding rules. For example, new-paradigm marketers focus on things like effectiveness over efficiency. As a result, they spend their time pinpointing where customers touch the brand, not where they want to send out messages.

New “P” four: visibility

Because brands are the visible representation of the value your organization offers its customers and prospects brands become absolutely critical in this new paradigm.

They provide instantaneous trust and knowledge. Brands work quickly, effectively and efficiently because they are the connecting points that your customers and prospects use to gain access to all the value that they believe your products, services and organization can provide them.

New paradigm brands allow customers and prospects to make decisions based on your thought leadership and recommendations from peers and influencers.

When so many voices are clamoring for your customer's and prospect's attention, and where so many alternatives

are available to them, a focused, identifiable brand presence becomes the most important asset of the marketing organization.

New “P” five: reciprocity relationships

There's little question that the new marketplace will be based more on direct brand relationships than on media weight, reach and frequency.

But it's a new kind of relationship. One that's defined by an ongoing, give-and-take between buyer and seller. Where each side wins in every exchange.

And that requires a new kind of thinking from you. A kind of “you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back” mentality that you rarely see today outside of Ed Asner in a tube top. This Ed Asner-type relationship should be your marketing goal, rather than a one-time sale.

In this new paradigm, life-time customer value becomes the yard stick. Because you can't “P” a customer into submission anymore. You can't constantly bombard them with repetitive promotion that tells them what to think about your products, services and prices.

And whether you like it or not, it will be your customers and prospects who determine the length, strength and depth of their brand relationship with your brand.

New paradigm brands

It's a new world out there, Scooter.

And new kinds of business brands are being born to take advantage of it.

Brands that will be successful in the new, connected market where customers and prospects control the flow of information, communications and the buying process will:

- Reflect what the company and offering truly is, not what the company wants people to believe it is.
- Be built around functional and emotional attributes that are valued most by customers and prospects when they are making a purchase or use decision.
- Look for their value, vision and promise in their customers' businesses, not their own.
- Find a unique human voice.
- Enter the market conversation around the brand to listen, learn, react and respond, rather than to simply send out, cram and jam interruptive messages.
- Create meaningful dialogues with customers and prospects, not monologues.
- Connect employees directly to the market conversation.
- Connect employees to customers by integrating and circulating the voice of the customer back into the organization at all levels.
- Align external market positions with the company's internal culture around a unifying vision, mission and system that delivers reciprocal value.
- Communicate a consistent corporate belief (a reason for being) both internally and externally.
- Use this shared belief to secure trust and loyalty from within the organization and from the marketplace among customers and prospects.

What's a Mobium?

It would be nice to say we're an agency. Or brand consultants. Or a research firm. But we can't. Because we're not.

We're mutants.

We're none of those things. And we're all of them. We're a squishy blob of media agnostics united by brand, marketing and communications principles, paradigms and processes, and focused on helping business marketers turn change into a competitive advantage in their markets.

We change things

We believe in change. We see things differently, think differently and do things differently.

In fact, we're dedicated to business marketers who want to change the outmoded conventions of their industries. We help change agents craft their brand strategies, create authentic brand experiences and powerfully communicate them inside their organizations and outside to the world.

We transform things

Most importantly, we help change agents go beyond incremental improvements to the things that transform companies and brands.

Things like helping them find and create uncontested market space where they don't have to compete as a commodity. Or helping them disrupt market conventions to make room for disruptive new business models. Or helping them to take their marketing to a whole new level in a new marketing world by better understanding the passions and drivers of technical buyers.

We're the end of the world as we know it

Mobium is the product of revolutionary information and technology changes that are creating a new age of business marketing and communications. In fact, we're part of a revolution to change the very nature of work. To do work that really matters. That makes a difference.

We're not traditional in any way, including the way we're organized, the way we work or how we relate to one another. We do virtually everything together. As collaborative colleagues.

We're change freaks

So we're always evolving. In fact, we've been altered more times and in more ways than Drew Carrie's tuxedo. And we're proud of it.

We're hard to categorize because we're a new kind of thing. And if that's not confusing enough, we're always reinventing ourselves.

Right now, we're consultants who do everything to execute. We don't have departments. Our organization chart looks like a flower instead of a pyramid. We're strategy process freaks who only care about creative work. And all we want to do is change almost everything about conventional business marketing, branding and communications.

Organized chaos

In other words, Mobium is slightly organized chaos in the service of change. So it's difficult to compare us to what's already out there. And if you do, you'll become as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion.

Developing comprehensive, transformative brand and marketing programs to meet the broad range of our clients' business-to-business needs is what we do. Developing and creating these programs to turn change into a competitive advantage for our clients is what we do best.

Buddy, can you paradigm?

This New Paradigm series of e-books is just one way we invite you to learn about how to cultivate the power of change. Our website is another. Our blog dedicated to agents of b-to-b change (www.wasiswillbeblog.com) is yet another. You can follow us on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. And you can see and hear thought leaders on business marketing change on our website or YouTube channel. So join the revolution. We'd love to hear your experiences, opinions and insight.

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More Mobium e-books

Change is ugly, freakish, hard to face and downright frightening. But paradigms are shifting all over the place. To the point that business marketing these days isn't just about change. It's like riding the bus. It requires change.

That's the purpose of this series of little books.* To share a shiftload of what we believe you'll have to confront, whether you want to or not. Because they'll dramatically affect the way you'll have to market and brand in the future.

In our travels down these new roads, we've discovered that some of the guideposts have changed dramatically. Some have not. And probably never will.

As Bill Bernbach said, "It took millions of years for man's instincts to develop. It will take millions more for them to even vary. It is fashionable to talk about changing man. A communicator must be concerned with unchanging man, with his obsessive drive to survive, to be admired, to succeed, to love, to take care of his (or her) own."

The key is to make room for the things that change without tossing out the principles that never will. And then to integrate the two together. These, then, are the principles that we believe in, applied to whole new paradigms in business communications today.

To help make sense of it all, we've created a series of little e-books on interrelated subjects.

Actually, we believe these disciplines are more than related. They're inseparable. They are interdependent. You won't be able to excel in one without the others and still succeed. Especially in today's wacky world of change.

The New Paradigm Series

Shift This

Leveraging the paradigm shifts that are changing business marketing

Brandwidth

Increasing the power of business brands to generate sales in a changing world

Goosing

Integrating your communications to move customers and prospects to purchase in a new age

The Age of Engagement

The role of creative impact in a world of business marketing change

Hugs

Building stronger sale relationships with customers in the new age of business buying

Interactivate

Developing digital dialogues with buyers in the face of business marketing change

Follow the Money

Measuring the return on your marketing investment in the face of business change

If you'd like a copy of any of the other e-books in the series, just call 1.866.2MOBIUM. Or visit us at www.mobium.com.

*Beyond the obvious self-serving desire to get your work by demonstrating that we can help you turn change into a competitive advantage in your market

mobium

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