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Customers Come First

Develop marketing based on customer wants and needs

By Scott Hornstein

When customers experience a marketing message, there are three subliminal questions they ask themselves: "Who are you, and why should I care?" "What do you want from me?" and, "What's in it for me?" If the answers aren't apparent and compelling, the customer will be long gone.

A successful marketing effort will formulate responses to these questions by bringing prospects to the planning table early on, through "voice of customer" qualitative research, via one-on-one interviews, which can hone a company's competitive edge, and challenge marketing assumptions. First, however, marketers have to ask themselves the following: How do customers view my company? What attributes or values do they think of? The answers will help build the most effective positioning, and will tell customers who you are and why they should care.

Take this example: A small manufacturer of printed circuit boards found a new competitor was initiating a price war. To formulate a response, he asked his best customers the basis of their loyalty. They told him: "We are your customers because of the quality and service we receive; price is meaningless without that." They showed that there are always buyers who'll want price first, but they aren't the loyal market segment.

Marketers must also be knowledgeable of how the customer decides to adopt the particular product or service. Who are the influencers, and what information do they need? Marketing messages ask customers to listen, learn, and be motivated—understanding the decision-making process enables marketing to bring the right message to the right individual at the right time.

For example, when Productivity Point International (PPI), a training company based in Morrisville, North Carolina, prepared to enter a new market segment called customer education, it found that the decision-making process differed by company, and often involved nontraditional decision makers who weren't familiar with PPI. To get acquainted with these decision makers and educated about their process, PPI implemented a focused, longer-term public relations effort that involved case histories, Webinars, articles, and other materials to raise awareness and generate response—which helped them get their foot in the door.

As far as what's in it for the customer, their reactions to your messaging provide the basis of your competitive differentiation. After Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Compaq merged, they asked customers for their reactions to their new marketing messages. Customers responded with concern that basic HP values were getting lost in what they saw as hype or spin. Representative comments include:

"HP has a good technical heritage. This should be your focus. Is this boring to you? It's important to us!"

"The benefit to us is people and service. Keep the people partnership in your messages: HP is there for you."

"Steer clear of competitor bashing. Play to your strengths: the breadth of quality products and robust support. HP is the standard."

All of these examples show how important it is to get customer input early in the marketing process. Gordon Johnson, former director of marketing at PPI, sums it up by saying: "Listening to and incorporating customers' views is our reality check. It helped us to make some very important and successful marketing decisions." s&mm


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