

IT'S ALL ABOUT WHO YOU KNOW

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For any business, and regardless of whether the market is up or down, success hinges on one thing: who you know. Now, I'm not talking about the so-called "good ol' boy" or, for that matter the "good ol' girl" network (although it can help and they frequently have lovely parties.) No, I'm talking about a) knowing your customers and b) knowing your employees.

Three of my recent Billings Business columns underscore the need to know—and the benefit of knowing—these two very crucial and very distinct groups and what they need to hear. And as you'll see, how well you know them will ultimately determine the success or failure of your organization.

I was one of those kids who wouldn't take anyone's word for anything. If I was told not to jump off of a fence, then I jumped off a fence. If I heard, "don't play with BB guns," guess what I did? Once I even tried on my friend's contact lenses, just to see how they felt.

The point is, I'm someone who needs to try things out for myself. I have to know what makes something—and someone—tick. And when you're creating a business or marketing strategy, it's a modus operandi that will serve your company well.

One of the first commandments of marketing is "know thy customer." Know what they're buying and why they're buying. Understanding who your customers are and what motivates them will help ensure that your marketing efforts are targeted and don't totally miss their mark.

For example, lead generation company Salesgenie.com spent millions of dollars to produce and run three thirty-second spots during the 2008 Super Bowl. Written by InfoUSA CEO Vin Gupta, the ads got people talking—but not in a good way. A storm of controversy swirled around the cartoon-style spots, and they were pulled, never to

air again. When asked about the ads, Gupta admitted that they had never been tested on consumers. He not only failed to focus on his target market, he never considered who would be seeing the ads or how people would react to them.

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Last year, I had the opportunity to sit down with the board of Good Earth Market to talk about helping with some of their marketing efforts. I could barely contain my excitement because my cupboards are stocked with organic, hormone-free, good-for-the-earth foods. I've spent hours worshipping unsullied tomatoes in the store's glorious produce aisle. I force carrot juice-enhanced sports drinks on my son. This was a company that was close to both my heart and my stomach.

But when I told my team the good news, their response was not what I had anticipated. This group of Gen-X and -Yers simply rolled their eyes and asked where was the nearest tree they could hug. At first, I was stunned. But as we talked, I learned that either they had not been to Good Earth or they went there only for special items that

couldn't be found in traditional grocery stores. And that's when I realized that in order to help tell the story of this remarkable co-op, we needed to shop in one another's shoes.

Working closely with the board, managers and staff of Good Earth Market, we put together a profile of the people who shopped there. We also conducted research among non-shoppers to learn their impressions of the store and to find out what would bring them in. We learned that those customers were neither stereotypical poncho-sporting sprout eaters nor wealthy shoppers who would not deign to step foot in a common grocery store. Be they wearing Birkenstocks, Jimmy Choos or Nikes, they were just average, everyday folks looking for tasty, fresh, healthy food. As a result, we were able to create a brand image and

message that was consistent with Good Earth's mission, while remaining compelling enough to bring in new customers.

So the next time you want to launch a new marketing effort, ask yourself: Do I truly know who my customer is? Am I in tune with what they think, feel and want? Have I given any thought to who they think I am? And have I asked them lately? If the answers are "no," then take the time to shop in their shoes before you waste their time and your money on a campaign that's likely to fail.

Hmm...there's a loose wire over here by my computer. Wonder what would happen if I yanked it out...

I'LL TAKE THE "5TH P" FOR \$1,000, ALEX

All right folks...
it's quiz time.

Question: What is your single most important—and most costly—advertising and marketing expense? (Cue annoying game show music.)

**Answer: What is...TV? Print ads?
Internet development?**

Wrong, nein, nyet, none of the above. Hmm. Could it be your marketing firm? Nice try. . . but no. Okay, the music in my head is getting really loud, so time's up! And the answer is (drumroll, please)...your employees.

I know, we've all heard about the 4 Ps of marketing: product, price, promotion and placement. But here's the thing: they can all be copied, virtually down to the letter, by your competition. So what sets you apart? **One more P: your people.**

Your employees are your eyes and ears, and they represent the face and voice of your company. They're the ones who talk to your customers, who hear what they have to say, who know what and how your competition is doing. Every move they make on the job is a reflection of you, from answering the phone to driving a truck to wearing a cap with your logo on it. And if they don't know or believe in your brand, then what is it they're actually saying about your business? And what can you do about it?

In *Managing the Customer Experience*, Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler note that there are many companies out there that have brand values, but never articulate to their employees how they should be expressed. Yet however noble those values may be, they will be lost unless they can be translated into concrete, consistent actions. So where do we begin?

FIRST, TALK WITH—NOT “AT”—YOUR EMPLOYEES. Branding any company, whether internally or externally, begins with a simple conversation. Ask your staff what they think your business is, what it represents and what sets you apart from the others. If their perceptions don't match your intentions, find out why. Allow them to take ownership of the brand and its values, and discuss ways in which they can better reflect the brand standard in their own job performance.

If your brand includes friendliness, for instance, then your front desk might set a goal to smile every time they answer the phone. Out in the field, delivery people could incorporate that value by always being considerate to other drivers. Remember, it's your name that's emblazoned on every door of their vehicles. To go really crazy with the concept, everyone in the office might even put down their Blackberrys and iPhones for a moment to greet colleagues in the hallway. All right, perhaps I've gone too far, but you get the point.

SECOND, TAKE STEPS TO PROMOTE YOUR INTERNAL BRAND. And for heaven's sake, use a little creativity and have some fun. I mean, the Success Poster series is a lovely idea, but it's also pretty generic and is usually ignored. Let your internal brand reminders pop up in the least expected places or at the least expected times.

For example, our company brand is all about high energy. So when deadlines are tight and folks get tense, we pump up the music for a few minutes as a reminder of what we're all about. (Staff and visitors alike are welcome to join in.) In your company, it might mean funny

(but tasteful) email blasts, morning cheers (yes, we've been known to do those, too), unexpected overhead announcements, or brand-oriented treats or promotional items. Branding begins in the workplace so make your workplace all about the brand.

THIRD, KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING.

When someone does something great, tell them and tell everyone else about it, too. Encourage your employees to give their colleagues a pat on the back for a job well done. Sometimes recognition from peers means even more than recognition from the boss.

Of course every company is different. I admit that getting your entire staff to not only rethink the relationship between your company's brand and the way they do their jobs—but also to act on it effectively—isn't always as easy as simply smiling on the phone and not jackknifing across a six-lane superhighway in your truck. But statistics show that internal branding is worth the work.

Studies show that when done right, internal branding results in harder working, more focused employees with increased loyalty and less turnover. And happy, focused employees means happy, repeat customers. Now, if you

want to really get excited, consider this: in a *Marketing Review* article, Jeff Resnick wrote that “companies that excel at creating and maintaining loyal customers can command prices that are 4 to 7 percent higher than weaker companies and...generate up to three times more profit.”

So there you have it. Skillful internal branding can translate into standing out from—and staying ahead of—your competition. Okay, hands on the button—it's quiz time again.

Question: Are you ready for some internal branding? (Cue annoying game show music.)

Answer: What is...Yes?



CAN WE TALK?

BE UNIQUE OR BE A COMMODITY

I have a teenager. He texts—constantly. So much so, in fact, that his monthly cell phone minutes run around 200, while his texts are three or four times that amount. His ability to text leaves me both appalled and mesmerized at the same time. He texts while walking, while eating and while talking to others.

The other night I found him still up at 11 p.m., phone in hand, but this time he was actually talking on it—to a girl. Instead of getting upset, I calmly backed out of the room and gave him the signal to keep on going. I was elated just to see him having a real conversation.

What kind of conversation are you having with your customer? Do you talk in choppy, sporadic and essentially meaningless “textese,” or are you having a conversation, engaging your customer and telling your story?

In today’s rapidly commoditizing marketplace, the customer conversation is fast-becoming the last stronghold of competitive differentiation. We tell our clients they need a message and a messenger. The problem is that most businesses deliver a message that is boring, via a messenger that is equally banal. Most businesses fall back on the same hackneyed, uninspired conversations with their customers and then expect to get some sort of radical result. If you want results and you want to be the conversational hit of the party, here are four things that will get you engaged in a real conversation:

1. DIFFERENT IS GOOD. There is no point in spending your hard-earned money on advertising if all you’re going to say is the same thing everyone else is saying. And in this day and age, even if you do come up with something new to say, you’d better find a different way to say it. People are bombarded with advertising every day, with each sensorial assault meant to somehow stand apart from the rest. (“If only they really knew us...”). Coco Channel said, “In order to be irreplaceable, one must be different.”

2. YOUR BRAND NEEDS A PERSONALITY. Most businesses are very focused on the look of their advertising/marketing. And then they forget the voice. One of the ways to be different is to give your business a unique personality; but make sure it’s a personality that is true to your company’s inherent character. I love Indigo

Wild (indigowild.com), a company that sells a natural body product line called Zum. Their brand voice is so full of personality, I want to invite it to our next party. It is fun, it is edgy, it is a little raw and it fits them perfectly (this is a company that developed “Zum Bum—a Bidet in a Bottle”). But don’t fake personality. No matter how hard they try, Wal-Mart is never going to be “cool.” It’s just not them. And don’t confuse your audience with multiple personalities. Be clever, be creative, be true and, above all, be consistent.

3. WORDS MEAN SOMETHING. Good writing should inform, and it should achieve this by being simple, clear and logical. Bad writing is none of these things—it merely confuses, frustrates and irritates the reader. And just because someone can put together a coherent sentence does not necessarily mean they should be writing your materials. I made a good living as a marketing writer because I did something well: I learned to write the way people talk. I don’t mean the messy, interrupted shorthand of casual conversation. I mean real, authentic language that engages people and moves them to act. If you use language that is too technical, jargon-ridden, or full of clichés, you create barriers and turn people off. And generally, you won’t get a second chance. You have a story to tell—tell it simply and tell it memorably.

4. MAKE THE MESSENGER RELATABLE. The more you humanize your message, the more your audience will relate to it. For example, I once wrote brochure copy for an assisted living home. Typical language would be something like, “At Sunshine Assisted Living, we care for your loved ones with respect, dignity and love.” I chose a different approach: “Betty Smith walks the world of the forgotten elderly, people who are often alone and grieving. They grieve for the loss of independence and the loss of their value in the community. Yet Betty Smith knows the difference she’s making every day as a member of the staff at Sunshine Assisted Living...” Relatable, meaningful and engaging conversations will get you noticed, remembered and sought out.

There is much to gain or lose in a conversation with your customer. Today’s prospect is constantly barraged with marketing messages vying for their limited time and attention. A well-thought-out conversation cuts through all the noise and gets your business noticed.

