

Vol 3 Issue 3 Dec 2013

Impact Factor : 1.6772 (UIF)

ISSN No : 2249-894X

*Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

*Review Of
Research Journal*

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Welcome to Review Of Research

RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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MARKETING – THE IMPORTANCE OF CREDIBLE STORIES

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Abstract:

Marketing is a fascinating subject. What makes it intriguing is that it is also a “soft” subject. Despite all the research that goes into getting the 4 Ps of marketing right, marketing campaigns often fail, because they do not tell a credible story.

There is a child in all of us that likes to hear interesting stories. Organizations which can tell better stories and back it up with matching consumer experience will not only start better but sustain performance better. Companies that are continuously innovating create value and have the ability to tell credible stories. Whether one is promoting a product or service, engaging in corporate branding or building an employer brand, the success of its efforts depends on its ability to create a compelling and credible story.

This article explores the importance of credible storytelling through several examples of how some organizations weaved this soft aspect into their campaigns to create marketing success, and how some others failed to do so.

KEY WORDS:

Marketing , Credible Stories , fascinating subject , marketing campaigns .

INTRODUCTION

What makes a good marketing campaign?

Philip Kotler had said that when companies are selling lipstick, they are actually selling “hope”.

While there are several factors that contribute to a campaign that can create a lasting impression, there is one that is of fundamental importance. Without this strong foundation, a campaign would fall short of its potential capacity to create impact.

The counter question is, “Do you have a credible story to tell?”
Why is Storytelling Important?

Stories are what we have grown up with. Stories have fascinated us from the early days of our childhood. In the beginning we would lap up everything without a question – stories of fairies and demons – whether these were credible or not. As we grew up, the nature of stories that appealed to us underwent change. We graduated to adventure stories. Further down we began appreciating mystery stories that challenged our intellect. And at a still higher level, it is knowledge and research woven into a storyline that holds our attention. We love folklore and stories. That is why they need to be an integral part of any marketing campaign.

What does Storytelling Achieve?

Storytelling can help create a unified marketing framework. Campaign planners can look at each element of the marketing mix to explore how these can be woven into a story that is relevant, consistent, and wholesome. Products and services have a lifecycle. What we say today should not be at variance with what we will say tomorrow. Just like a story must be based on a good plot and planned well, storytelling will force planners to create an appropriate plot and develop a story line that is consistent with the way the product and marketing mix development is planned over time.

Storytelling and Marketing Relevance

The target audience will find the story interesting only if it thinks it is relevant. An adult audience is unlikely to listen to a fairy tale. Whether consumers buy into our story or not depends on how we address the elements of our marketing - Product, Place, and Price to make these relevant for them. The concept of storytelling helps bring in the element of “time” as well. Product, place, and price would need to undergo change over time if they have to continue to hold the consumer's interest and this aspect may be missed completely without consideration of the Time continuum. What we do to remain relevant over the life cycle of the product is the aspect of strategy – the “masala” that makes our story unique and makes it endearing.

Companies often spend considerable time and effort to work out how they can differentiate their products from those of their competitors. They try to find unique selling propositions. However, most advertising campaigns end up focusing on product or service features only.

The ability to weave a good story forms the basis of a good marketing campaign. One marvels at a campaign that sounds refreshingly different. At the same time one often rejects or switches off when a campaign is interesting but not credible. People do not like their sensibilities disrespected. A good plot is essential to building a great story. This, though, is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. One, therefore, needs to examine the 'story' from two perspectives.

Does the organization have the ability to tell a story?

The organization's ability to tell a story is essential for marketing effectiveness. This is the essential condition. By and large, organizations look for story lines in their products, and the manner in which the organization brings the product to the consumer.

Feature based campaigns were the hallmark of Indian IT advertising in the earlier days. Companies vied with each other on features such as CPU speeds, RAM, hard disc capacity, form factor, etc. — components over which they had little R&D control. The advent of the IBM PC compatible, of course, made everything sound similar and made the features oriented advertising quite a drab affair.

Similarly, motorcycles would compete based on engine capacity and fuel efficiency. This is not to say that features are not important considerations in buying behavior. The moot point here is that unless you have a feature that you can translate into a meaningful value-added user benefit, and then weave a story around it that the user finds interesting, marketing hasn't even got off the ground.

Some great Stories

FedEx is a great example of how it built a great story around organization capability that helps deliver consignments on time, every time – from building infrastructure, route design, consignment tracking systems, to developing people capability to operate efficiently and effectively. The story was built around the concept of reliability, trust, and peace of mind afforded to customers when they chose FedEx. So while turnaround time may have been their competitive advantage, what sustained this advantage was the emotional connect of the story with consumers that painstakingly conveyed how they made it possible every time.

Earlier, computer maker Compaq built a compelling story in a marked deviation from the feature based advertising that went with server advertising. Instead of features it focused on consumer pain points such as losses due to server downtime. It was able to strike an emotional connect with system administrators by creating a compelling story of what went into designing a server that monitored its own health and provided advance warning of any impending failure. The hot-plug drives were not just technology advancements; they afforded good and credible story lines.

More recently, the makers of Axe deodorants set a trend in advertising by focusing on possibilities. The advertising has nothing to do with promoting product features. Instead it caters to the latent desires of the young and restless. This approach has spawned a whole new generation of deo products – all being

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promoted based on the same seduction platform. Needless to say, the ability to tell a good story is highly dependent on the organization's ability to engage in original work.

Corporate Branding

Success of corporate branding campaigns is even more dependent on the ability of the organization to engage in original and path breaking initiatives. If you are simply importing and assembling products that tens of other organizations are doing, do you still have an opportunity to create an interesting marketing campaign around the product? Sure, you may look for interesting angles in terms of uniqueness of manufacturing processes that bring value to the customer, or in distribution models which enable convenience of buying or enhance the buying experience.

Service organizations have opportunities to weave stories around the total customer experience while dealing with them. So a courier organization evolves systems for tracking of consignments, faster pick up and deliveries, etc. Then builds a story on how it achieves all this. A distribution company may have opportunities to build stories around the investments made by it to serve the retail consumer. Tesco for instance has been developing a hybrid retail model where consumers have the flexibility of shopping at its stores, or online, or placing orders online but picking up the goods from a store nearby. It's a compelling story of how Tesco will go the extra mile for the convenience of its customers and ties up neatly with its value – “No one (else) tries harder for customers.” Customers notice such efforts.

Storytelling ability: A barometer of value creation

Irrespective of whether or not an organization embarks on a marketing campaign, its ability to tell a good story is an effective indicator of whether it has been able to create value within the organization. And this depends on how much control it has over the creation, generation and modification of the products, services and delivery mechanisms of these to the customer. An organization that finds itself short of interesting and credible plots for story lines must seriously introspect to see if it is in the right business or doing its business right.

That brings us to the second factor for a marketing success. This is where the advertising agencies come in. They are always trying to probe their clients to uncover promising plots that will help them build interesting stories. While creativity is a forte of the agency, the onus of being able to provide just the right brief to it lies squarely with the client and contributes in equal measure to the development of an effective marketing program.

The fact that memorable campaigns come few and far between cannot be simply attributed to the ad agencies' lack of creative initiative. To be fair to them, we find more and more products leaning on the emotional appeal that the ad is able to generate on its own rather than on a story that emerges from the uniqueness of the product or service.

The life insurance sector in India is a good example where organizations have lost credibility because they have not conducted business right. Insurance agents have been notorious for selling policies based on lies and half truths to unsuspecting customers. No amount of clever advertising based on current ways of working could have redeemed them.

Bajaj Allianz was the first to realize that agent malpractices have done the industry great disservice and that a completely new approach was needed. It went about addressing this pain point and projecting its agents as counselors and advisors who act in the best interest of customers. The marketing team effectively put out a good story based on the new ways of working. The campaign worked because it was an emotive story based on a credible new practice. Several other organizations were forced to adopt similar strategies and connect with customers to confirm their understanding of the policy before finalization of the contract. The industry had managed to salvage itself because it had a credible story to tell.

How should the story begin?

It is a much cluttered market out there. There are thousands of categories of products and services competing for mind space. With ever reducing attention spans, if we do not draw attention right in the beginning we probably never will.

A good story hitches us from the very first page of the book or within the first five minutes of a movie. A marketing campaign needs to be able to do the same in a sane and sensible way that builds respect for the brand.

Commercial advertising is a good example of situations where the entire proposition must be conveyed in a few seconds. Unfortunately, quite a few campaign managers get this wrong. They get women

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to pose with products that are totally unrelated. There is no story that links the two either. The advertisement may draw attention to the lady and not to the product.

Idea has used television advertising to gradually build great brand recall with interesting story lines right from its first advertisement. Its “kya idea hai Sir jee” series has been a great hit with profound and relevant social themes. Whether the campaign and story could have been more credible is another story.

Sustaining the Story

Let us now look at another aspect of storytelling – sustainability. Only credible stories can be sustained. That means consumers see no difference between what is sold and what they get, every time. It is about building trust. Children will immediately spot the difference if you deviate from the storyline the second time. That is why you can add to the story but not change it; unless the children get tired of repetition and want to hear another story. And children do wish to hear new stories. This brings us to the point of managing the product life cycle from its inception to growth to maturity and eventual decline. How do you create a credible story consistent in its theme that will endear consumers over the product life cycle? Does there appear to be a contradiction here?

How could one possibly create a consistent story from inception through the decline phases? Thankfully there isn't any contradiction. The whole idea of marketing is to extend the growth phase endlessly. So the story primarily needs to address this phase. A theme that focuses on the continuous innovation in the marketing mix and what goes behind to add value to consumers is one example of such a theme.

Going back to the Idea advertisement, could the company have built a more credible marketing campaign? Had Idea followed up its advertisements with actions on the ground to implement its social message it would have built greater audience connect and marketing effectiveness. It had a golden opportunity to build a compelling story around its corporate social responsibility initiatives. Unfortunately it has not been able to sustain the initial enthusiasm created by its advertisements into greater competitive advantage. This is a good example of how difference in the story and reality can impact credibility and outcomes of marketing efforts.

Surf is an excellent example of how Unilever has sustained the product for over decades. They have continued to innovate and improve the product and present endearing stories of how the product adds value and meets changing user preferences. The story is credible because the product is; and the product derives its credibility because of the organizations capability to innovate and push the boundaries. The story is consistent in its theme, yet does not get stale.

It is interesting to draw comparisons here with its one time competitor - Nirma. Nirma challenged Surf on price and gave it a run for its money. It had a price advantage but no sustainable story. While Nirma rested on its advantage, Unilever worked hard on product improvement and hit back with a compelling story on how Surf was safer on hands. With no visible innovation, it was only a matter of time that Nirma was vanquished.

Sustainability and Employer Branding

Nowhere is the aspect of sustainability of the story more relevant than when organizations sell themselves through an exercise called employer branding. While what we have discussed so far also contributes to employer branding, this is something that organizations do as a way to attract and hire people. It is about forging a different kind of relationship with people.

Organizations create employer branding in different ways by selling their “employee value proposition.” These could be opportunities to work on the latest cutting edge technologies, fast paced career progression, work-life balance, the best of rewards, opportunities for research, global experience and so on.

While organizations may successfully create positive public opinion through clever advertising, in this situation they open themselves to far more intense scrutiny. As people buy into an organization's employee value proposition and come on board they have an opportunity to personally test the proposition over an extended duration. A mismatch in what is sold and what is could severely undermine organizations' ability to sustain hiring ability.

Employer branding is a far more difficult and sensitive exercise as it needs to be credible to both internal and external audiences. Management can lose respect as existing employees will clearly see through exaggerated claims and when new hires come on board and experience things for what they are. Sustainable marketing effectiveness is about credible stories based on real capabilities and real deliverables.

The Implements of Storytelling

When we base our marketing strategies on the story framework, we are conscious that time is an extremely important element of our plan. The target audience may be the same, but demographics change over time. In essence it is about generating similar feelings with different tools. Children today may be more enamored with star wars than by kings fighting demons but the excitement they seek is the same. More adults have taken to playing games on mobile sets than on the field. The storytelling framework reminds us to build a campaign using implements that are in tune with the times. Would the consumer like to hear the story, read a book, or see a movie?

Inference

It's time we looked at marketing differently - not as just one more management function, but as a mirror of all that we do and are capable of doing — a possible indicator of value creation within the organization. For if you don't have a credible story to tell, your business may not have a customer to sell to.

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