



## Get back to basics to battle information overload

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In the e-commerce gold rush, my company is an outfitter.

Like you, we watch in awe (and a little envy) as people we know go from zero to \$60 million in seven months. Lacking their courage and connections, we content ourselves to sell some of the supplies they need for their trip.

In the long run, it might not be a bad idea. After all, the Nordstroms and Bartells began as outfitters for the Klondike.

The supplies we provide are not boots or bandages, but marketing advice. In just the past four weeks, five Internet start-ups have asked our company to help them develop marketing plans. You'd think we would be delighted with the fruits of the Information Age.

There's just one problem.

Cheap, digital, pervasive information has made my job much harder. The potent combination of technology and capitalism is delivering 3,000 commercial messages a day to the average American adult (20 years ago, that figure was estimated at 700). The typical business manager is expected to read about a million words per week.

Into the teeth of this information hurricane, I must figure out a way to deliver my client's marketing messages.

### **The old tricks don't work**

It isn't just my problem. Infoglut changes the marketing rules for big

corporations, small start-ups, business services, local retailers—anyone who has to get people's attention to make a sale.

Some large advertisers and well-funded Web sites think they have an answer: run more ads. At the other end of the spectrum are shoestring marketers who put their faith in a Web site, some radio spots, and clever search engine tricks.

If you're comfortable being in one of those categories, you can stop reading here. If you're not, perhaps I can help by describing four things I believe companies must do to sell effectively in the cluttered new marketing environment.

These are not concepts I came up with myself. Rather, they reflect what I think is the smartest recent thinking about marketing, and the approaches that have been most effective, in hindsight.

### **1. Determine which customers will be most important to your company, and what your company does that is most important to them.**

Segment your market not by demographics, but by behavior. What are your best prospects doing now? How are they currently solving the problem that you think you can solve better? What are the attitudes and perceptions that make them act that way?

There's nothing new about this marketing fundamental. It seems obvious that defining and understanding your target market would be critical in an age of attention-deficient consumers.

So why do so few companies do market research?

I suspect three reasons. First, they did poorly planned research in the past and it sat on a shelf gathering dust. Second, they believe speed-to-market is more important. And third, they fall victim to the seductive notion that enough consumer information can now be found or gathered, quickly and cheaply, on the Web.

Beware the comfort of the desktop.

"Computers may have done more harm than good by making managers even more inwardly focused," observed management guru Peter Drucker in a recent *Forbes* interview. "Executives are so enchanted by the internal data the computer generates—and that's all it generates, by and large—they have neither the mind nor the time for the outside. Yet results are only on the outside. I find more and more executives less and less well informed (about the outside world)."

### **2. Your prospects are drowning in information. Throw them a lifeline.**

The type of marketing that works takes advantage of an interesting irony: clutter is not only a problem for you, it's a problem for your prospects.

They're confused by all the choices and baffled by conflicting promotional claims. Before you try to sell them a product, offer them help with their information problem. If it's objective, valuable help, they'll appreciate you for

it—and you'll have started a two-way relationship which you can manage to your mutual benefit.

The Internet provides a convenient and cheap way to offer prospects useful information. Web users say researching purchase decisions is their second most common activity, outranked only by e-mail. But don't assume the Web is the only way: depending on the product, people may prefer information in the mail, at a seminar, from a colleague, or on a product package.

Consumers will let in relevant information they feel they can trust. That's the insight behind the unconventional campaigns that offer competitive comparisons where the sponsor doesn't always win.

### **3. Consider marketing a long-term process that turns prospects into customers, and customers into loyal patrons who rave about your company.**

Seth Godin, in his excellent new book *Permission Marketing*, has a great analogy of how marketing works. He likens the traditional marketer to a guy who goes into a bar and asks a girl to marry him. Of course she says no, so he goes to the next girl and asks her.

He does this for all the women in the bar, and when he still hasn't found a mate, he moves on to the next bar.

Effective marketing, Godin says, works more like this. You ask the girl for a date. If she accepts, you get to

know each other a little better, then you ask for another date. After you go out for awhile, and you have a chance to demonstrate what a great guy you are, you might propose and get married.

Traditional marketing is based on point-in-time communications. Today, you must plan messages that move relationships. This requires that you give much more control to your customers. It also requires marketing managers who can integrate a communications program with a relationship management program, which implies a certain savvy about databases and networks.

### **4. Find talented resources who aren't biased by their business model.**

Technology is giving consumers more power to screen and choose their information. Irrespective of how your ad agency earns its money or any other preconceived notions about what media works best, you must use the contact points that your prospects and customers use for your product or service category.

If they get their information from their mothers, then you must figure out how to deliver your message via mothers.

At the beginning, your marketing must still break through the clutter and get a prospect's attention. You have to get that first date. This means that creative talent remains very important. The problem lies in finding good creative people who are willing to apply their talents not to "image advertising,"

but to messages that ask for a response.

This sort of message has to be interesting and engaging. But experience teaches us that it also has to offer something—perhaps a valuable piece of information, or a taste of the product.

### **The human equation**

Deloitte & Touche recently surveyed Washington's fastest-growing high-tech companies. A majority of respondents said that "finding and retaining good people" was the single biggest challenge facing the high-tech community as well as their own companies.

A majority also said their biggest increase in spending in 2000 would be for marketing and sales. I cannot resist connecting these two findings, because the key to marketing in this challenging marketing environment will be to find good marketing people.

It is one thing to write and code the company Web site. It is a different matter entirely to understand your customers, get their attention, and engineer mutually beneficial relationships with them.

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