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Messages must grab audience with meaning for brand loyalty

Business communicators often send out too many messages, saying the wrong things and reaching the wrong people.

Too many companies confuse dissemination with communication. They crank out a steady stream of words and images, but are deaf and blind to the impact. And, their brands suffer as a result of the directionless, emotionless dreck that comes from their keyboards.

Some dot-coms are among the worst offenders. Certain that quickly establishing brand presence and market domination results from rapid-fire message delivery, they have succeeded in generating awareness, but few are building brand equity.

Ironically, that case is made in a television commercial currently running for Iwon.com. It features a Web surfer who sarcastically claims he would turn away the chance to win big bucks because he likes the leading portal too much. He then laughs at how absurd such loyalty would be.

We all know people who wouldn't dream of switching from a favorite brand of soft drink, ketchup or antiperspirant if a competitive brand offered a sweepstakes.

The primary difference between these traditional brands and the dot-coms is emotion. Traditional brands have it and dot-coms don't.

Consumers have a visceral connection to the brands they prefer. Many people associate important moments of their lives with the products that surround them. To some degree, the preferred brands transcend their product attributes and benefits. They become a reflection of those who use them.

A number of specific steps can be taken to help establish or to strengthen a brand through communication:

- **Decide where the brand should go.** Is the goal for it to be seen as young and innovative or trusted and experienced? The brand destination will detail the organization's goals for that brand. Of course, recognize that external circumstances have a profound impact. Firestone should strive to be seen as caring and cooperative in the current environment of anger and suspicion. It must get there before hoping to reestablish



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trust in the quality and safety of its products.

- **Narrow the targets.** The term "general public" shouldn't be in the company's vocabulary. Create a detailed profile of the clients, prospects and the people who influence them. Go beyond gender, age, ethnicity and household income.

Examine what they do, where they do it and what they care about.

- **Narrow the messages.** What one or two things does the target audience really need to understand and remember? Remember that messages often are more powerfully communicated through images. Keep it simple and reach for emotion.

- **Communicate consistently.** It's human nature to want to respond to the competition's claims and describe how a product works. However, doing so reduces the chance of penetrating the minds of the target audiences with the information they really need to understand and remember.

- **Make "listening" a central element.** Pinpoint what emotional benefit the customers derive and the prospects need. Although the product may be the latest whiz-bang Internet solution, what does it mean for prospects, who are stressed out, working longer and commuting further? Get inside their lives.

- **Adjust course to capitalize on what is "heard."** This may be evolutionary, such as adjusting the target or the message, or it may be revolutionary. It also may go beyond communication. For instance, research showed women didn't care for the shopping experience associated with a company's product. The company introduced a more open and organized store layout, prompting more women to spend more time shopping and buying there.

Make it a habit to keep an ear to the ground. Find out what customers and prospects know about the company and listen to how they describe it.

That's where mundane, throw-it-in-the-garbage communication ends and where great, grab-'em-by-the-throat communication begins. ■

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