

Listen Carefully to Consumers

Many businesses say they're paying attention to what customers say, but few actually do. Are you a winner or a loser?

By Robin G. Brumfield

Gone are the days of growing your favorite crops and expecting them to sell themselves. This applies to both wholesale and retail markets. After all, large wholesale companies such as Coca-Cola do not sell directly to consumers, but they're very concerned about what consumers want. Your product must satisfy the needs of the customer, whether wholesaler or consumer.

Colin Coulson-Thomas, a specialist in corporate transformation, surveyed more than 2,000 companies and ranked them in terms of success. He compared the approaches of the "winners" with those of the "losers" to isolate the factors that make a difference. The results suggest that most of the critical success factors are related to the attitude and behavior of people in key positions; those factors made a difference in the success of bringing about a fundamental transformation in an organization. "Losers" are unsure and unaware of the needs of others. They

are cautious and fail to inspire or motivate. Losers are reactive, often failing to anticipate the need for change. They don't notice what is important and miss the biggest opportunities for performance improvement.

"Winners" tend to have a longer-term perspective. They are confident, positive and proactive. They create compelling visions. They encourage innovation and trust other people with information and opportunities. They understand their customers and concern themselves with increasing retention. Winners value relationships, empathize, ask for feedback and listen.

Most businesses say they listen to consumers, but few really do, and even fewer make transformational changes to address consumers' needs.

One of the most important aspects of marketing is giving your customers reasons to buy your products. Begin by describing the features, options, quality, accompanying service, name, packaging, etc. of your products. These product characteristics will show how your products differ from those of your competitors. They will carry information about the services you provide and will describe the benefits of your products or services from your customer's perspective.

Scattered throughout this feature are some ideas to help you seek out opportunities and attract today's consumer, but in general: Start off by identifying your target customers. Determine what they want or need. What problem do they have that you can solve? Then develop a product and/or program to meet those needs.

Consider Vegetables

In an economic downturn, sales of vegetable plants tend to increase as consumers want to grow their own vegetables. Michelle Obama's vegetable garden reinforced this trend. Unfortunately, in the Northeast, many consumers who tried growing their own tomatoes for the first time

in many years were hit with late blight. I see a marketing opportunity in helping them try again this year, including tip sheets for growing their veggies.

Farmers markets are benefiting from the new economy; maybe you could sell to a vendor or have your own booth at a market like this.

Focus on Loyalty

It drives growth, the engine for profits. In every industry, loyalty leaders are growing at more than twice the rate of their competitors.

Denise Wymore, culture consultant

Go Green

Everywhere I look, I see consumers still wanting to "go green" and "go local" — another opportunity to promote greenhouse-grown products. Promote ways that your business is approaching sustainability, but be careful not to greenwash.

Marketing = Dating?

Instead of stalking consumers, we need to "attract" them. As in dating, we want to make them want to go out with us. We have to stop begging for business with membership "bribes" and rate specials as our only opening line. That just makes us look like a cheap date. Generations X and Y will market for you or against you by word of mouth. They will do it with technology: Facebook. Twitter. YouTube. Blogs. Yelp.





The New Consumer

Changing U.S. demographics — more mature consumers, greater ethnic diversity and, for the first time ever, more women in the workforce than men — are driving changes in consumer demand for agricultural products. And changing consumer preferences, along with technological advances and economic shifts, offer new opportunities. Understanding these changes and tailoring your products and services to today's "diverse consumer preferences" moves your product to the forefront and pulls it through the supply chain.

The current recession has created a new niche of consumers identified as the "downturn generation" by Information Resources, Inc. This generation of Americans is adopting practices

similar to Depression-era shoppers to weather the recession, but these changes are expected to become the "new normal" and last long after the economy improves.

The IRI report, "Dissecting the Downturn Generation: Recognizing and Leveraging Permanence in Today's Transformational Economy," highlights how shoppers are changing behaviors in response to the unstable economy. They identify three emerging categories of shoppers.

Optimists. These consumers believe "things will get better during the next 12 months," are spending wisely, cutting back selectively and making sacrifices as a last resort.

Maintainers. They think "the economy won't get worse, but it won't get better, either" and are spending wisely but are more aggressive about cutting back.

Pessimists. They identify with the direst predictions ("if you think times are hard now, next year will be worse"), are cutting back wherever possible and hunt tirelessly for deals.

Shoppers are looking for signs that the economy is pulling out of the recession; in particular, they want stability in home values as well as gas, food and energy prices. Consumers are concerned how these economic shifts will affect their ability to own a home that rises in value, hold a job with security, build savings and gain access to credit sources.

Shoppers' weakened financial conditions are profoundly affecting how they shop and what they buy:

Tattoos: Proof of a Successful Brand

Harley-Davidson is one of the most requested tattoos in America, and it's a corporate logo! Can you imagine customers so loyal that they would tattoo your logo somewhere on their body? How could you build your brand to that point? It gets back to listening to the consumer.



- Target an audience, not a territory.
- Talk to your target.
- Identify the competition FOR your target.
- Make the competition irrelevant.
- Be loyal to your target.

John Stanley suggests these approaches:

- Get into people's homes. That is where the decisions are made.
- Recognize that customers are changing and keep up with them.
- Focus on familiar products and promote them.
- Promote value, not just price.
- Customers are prepared to travel to businesses they trust and will do right by them.
- Think of suppliers as partners; you will need to work together in the future.
- The new customer is a lot more conservative; they need to feel safe before they will open their purse or wallet.



- More than 69 percent say they are more likely to look through ads for deals.

- Nearly 82 percent are more likely to look for sale prices once in the store.

- Just under two-thirds say price is becoming more important than convenience in brand purchases.

- 50 percent of consumers are using coupons they've downloaded or clipped from newspapers or magazines.

- Shoppers are giving up favorite brands, buying smaller quantities of preferred items or postponing non-essential purchases.

- Many consumers need or want good deals and will search for lower prices. This means that producers must supply the products that consumers want — and keep production costs low.

The Brand Is YOU!

Every company has a brand. Your brand is your reputation. If you have a bad reputation, all the membership drives, marketing campaigns and rate specials in the world can't help you. Your salespeople have more impact on your reputation than anyone in management. They are the relationship. They are the ones who take the time to look at the vacation photos and get to know your customers intimately. Corporations don't have values; people do. Your brand is the sum of the values of your employees. All of them. ■



Promote Value

Should you be promoting luxury or premium in the new economy? Studies show that consumers perceive a luxury as a needless expensively-priced product that does not relate to top performance. They see a premium product as one where you pay more, but you also get more. So focus on value instead of luxury. Luxury is a bit of a dirty word now, while bargain hunting is in.

Reaching Multicultural Consumers | The Psychographic Approach to Marketing

For too long, we've relied on demographic data to develop marketing campaigns. Consequently, we often promote "me-too" products in an overly competitive market. Census data doesn't tell us what is unique about the people in our market: their aspirations, likes and dislikes, slang, values. Beginning with your organization's core values, and how they impact your reputation in the marketplace.

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