



May 7, 2007

Branding involves authenticity, generosity, emotion

BUILDING CONSUMER BRANDS — once considered out of reach for most produce companies — is becoming more practical with the expansion of technology-driven media and new opportunities to work with retailers.

This couldn't come at a better time.

The dynamics of a changing marketplace, combined with intense global competition, make demand strategies a more frequent priority for agrifood companies.

Differentiation is everything. Your brand — how others perceive you — is your differentiation. You can leave it to others to draw assumptions about you or proactively have a say in how your company and your product line are perceived.

Leveraging new media to expand beyond traditional trade promotion requires consumer brand-building strategies as state-of-the-art as new technology. Procter & Gamble, which brings more successful brands to supermarkets than anyone else, has a new approach to building consumer brands.

The marketing world listens when P&G speaks. The good news is that produce companies seeking to develop consumer brands can tap into these breakthrough principles.

Jim Stengel, P&G's chief marketing officer, told the advertising industry this year that his company is moving from "tell-and-sell" brand building to creating stronger consumer relationships. It's a shift in mind-set to make brands more relevant to today's consumers. It's an acknowledgment that it's getting harder to effectively communicate with consumers.

We also live in a world where a message is easily wasted if consumers don't trust the source. Establishing a relationship with consumers is a first step in building trust. A focus on relationship building also reflects the interplay between consumer lifestyles and

the rapid evolution of communication technology that is changing how consumers gather information and talk with others.

Conversations about products are ongoing. And, with the Internet, a friend or neighbor can be next door or around the world. Consumers are in control of the dialogue that's shaping brands. They are the gatekeepers, with more choices than ever.

Building a consumer brand is now dependent on having a consumer's "permission" to exchange information, which is far more likely if a relationship is in place.

How do produce companies begin to build relationships with consumers? P&G cites three principles: Be authentic, express generosity and create experience.

1. Be authentic.

A top item now on a marketer's agenda is helping consumers appreciate who you are and what you stand for (versus a few salient adjectives of consumer benefit). P&G is taking a hard look at what it is doing to inspire consumer trust. Marketers are asking, "Do we understand what's important to our consumers? How can our brands connect with them?"

For produce, it may be a more basic question: "Do we even have the right products and packaging?"

When we are authentic, we connect with people, and they reward us by buying our products. Authenticity is particularly important in produce since consumers typically don't know much about where the product comes from. Helping consumers see how products are grown and processed and the passion of the people behind the brand is a way to demonstrate both authenticity and transparency.

2. Express generosity.

Relationships based on giving can be compelling. Stengel stresses building a positive mind-set based on the principle of abundance. Exceeding consumer expectations doesn't mean giving away the farm. Instead, consumers know the brand doesn't see the world as a zero-sum game.

In produce, for example, sharing a product's nutrition profile can expand value. This idea is useful for produce brands sharing new disease-fighting health benefits in a compelling way. P&G does something similar with its 75-year-old Metamucil brand. Traditionally, the brand promoted regularity. Its current relationship-building focus is on the brand's ability to lower

cholesterol — “Making you as beautiful on the inside as you are on the outside.”

3. Create experience.

At the core of a meaningful brand relationship is a positive experience where emotion makes it both memorable and attractive enough to repeat.

Starbucks is often cited for building a brand experience around a cup of coffee. It starts with listening closely to consumers to understand what is important to them and then framing a compelling story to bring that brand experience to life.

More than a decade ago, P&G began looking for ways to broaden the purchase beyond price promotion. It focused on the “first moment of truth” — when shoppers confront a product on the shelf. The company learned that locally focused, in-store appeals can create an emotional connection and a powerful call to action.

Some marketers have difficulty with the idea that a company doesn't really own or control its brand, that consumers do. Produce companies are in a great position to help consumers interact with their brands through supermarket loyalty programs, Web sites and in-store media.

Progressive retailers are now beginning to see real business value in the personalization of communication and product offerings. Brands are also using social networks or their own e-communities to learn what consumers like and don't like about their products, and they're testing new ideas.

OUR ROAD MAP: We see six steps to initiating a road map for this new approach to consumer brand building.

- Step 1. Do a “deep dive” into your consumers' lifestyle needs.
- Step 2. Identify what makes you authentic.
- Step 3. Formulate a brand your consumers can own.
- Step 4. Build a compelling experience.
- Step 5. Shape a giving relationship with consumers.
- Step 6. Identify retail partners with compatible marketing strategies.

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