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## Trust networking changes marketing

### GUEST EDITORIAL

By **KERRY TUCKER**



**T**HE erosion of trust (refer to "Brand distrust continues to grow," February 2006, Page 8) in traditional information sources, such as business, government, scientists and news media, has consumers taking matters into their own hands and "pulling" knowledge from sources they choose. To whom they are going for help may surprise you.

Beyond the lack of confidence in the traditional sources of information lies a fundamental change, a yearning to move beyond using information to social networking, according to Richard Edelman, who heads an international public relations firm that bears his name.

"It's now the wisdom of the crowd with constant updating of content based on personal experience," says Edelman. It's a neighbor-helping-neighbor strategy.

All of this is turning the traditional approach to branding and marketing upside down. It's one of the most significant changes Food Foresight has uncovered in 13 years of anticipating and tracking trends.

#### New media mix

Many believe mass marketing is over, and success will require a more targeted approach that uses consumer data to cluster consumers into segments based on what they want (and buy) vs. what companies want to sell. It means expanding your outreach from traditional opinion leaders to the new "elite" shaping public opinion: involved consumers, nongovernmental organizations and empowered employees. It also means including narrowcast media, Web sites, podcasts and blogs in the media mix.

Consumers want to know more about the company behind the brand. They want to know who it is and for what it stands. Strategic- and brand-planning processes must better align a brand with "corporate character" — mission, core values, culture. Authenticity and transparency will separate winners and losers in this redistribution of consumer confidence.

Research shows that the most important driver of trust is a history of delivering quality products and services that meet expectations. Consumer demand is for convenience, new experiences and more choices.

#### Product authenticity

Consumers also want healthy foods that are perceived to be tied to environmentally friendly production, according to the Hartman Group, a research firm sending anthropologists and sociologists into the field to study markets.

One report according to Food Foresight predicts significant growth in an emerging sustainable market category that stops short of organic, yet still taps into products consumers perceive to be healthy.

Hartman researchers also point to products benefiting from an emotional connection to a product's authenticity — knowing where it's grown and by whom. This is an untapped opportunity for farmers to help themselves by helping retailers differentiate their products. Find out what consumers value (or could value) about your products and adjust both production practices and marketing.

#### Generate conversation

Agri-food companies cannot ignore consumer-direct strategies to tap into these personalized webs of trust. It brings new meaning to stimulating word-of-mouth communication.

Create product conversations with your most loyal end consumers — those who use or care most about your products. Food Foresight reports that about one-third of retail customers purchase the majority of any product line. They can be the most vocal product advocates — if you empower them to be — and the Internet gives you the opportunity to foster relationships with these consumers the way grocers did years ago when they knew customers by name.

Six years ago, WD-40 Co. went directly to consumers to develop 2,000 uses for this spray lubricant. The response was so overwhelming that the company created the WD-40 Fan Club. Through the club, which now has 100,000 members, WD-40 Co. communicates with these "fans," involving them in product research and giving them "inside" new-product information and promotions so they share what they learn with family, friends and neighbors.

Chicken of the Sea created its Mermaid Club three years ago, and it now has 90,000 members. The shelf-stable seafood company does product tests with members who tell them what they like and don't like about products and packaging. They're also helping with recipes for an online recipe book that will be the catalyst for a new product launch. This will be "their" product launch, and they'll tell family, friends and peers about it.

The economic impact of this Chicken of the Sea product evangelist strategy is coupon response. The average coupon return from newspaper drops is 3% to 5%. However, Chicken of the Sea is seeing redemption at 7% to 10% with coupons sent to club members.

If spray lubricant and canned seafood can stimulate conversations among their elite customers, imagine what you can do for fruits, vegetables or cheese.

*Tucker is chief executive officer of Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc., a San Diego firm that founded Food Foresight, a 13-year trends intelligence collaboration with the California Institute of Food and Agricultural Research at University of California Davis.*