

Execution kills: How integrated programs bore themselves to death

Gordon Hochhalter

So this guy goes into a business-to-business marketing conference for a shot of integrated enlightenment. What does he get?

First, he's served a direct marketing process, masquerading as integrated, where the only brand contact tools are mail, phone and personal sales.

That's followed by an international guru with a nifty formula for global integration that sounds a heck of a lot like a public relations plan in disguise. Sips of stupidity

Next on the menu is a guy with a foolproof method for building integrated brand communications based on response quotients. If you want 90 percent brand building and 10 percent response, you put this device in this location on the piece. If you want 80 percent brand and 20 percent response you follow these handy-dandy instructions. And so on and so on in ten percent increments.

Amazing.

Especially coming from a guy who couldn't create gas after a bean dinner. And if you're not as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion by now, you can pick up a chaser at the registration table — a book called "Words That Sell." This pithy little tome gives you all the time-tested phrases that "copywriters rely on to seduce audiences." All indexed by function from "snappy transitions" to "enhancing company image."

Have we gone stark raving mad?

Is this what integrated marketing and brand communications has come to? Piecemeal processes that impersonate integration? Do we really believe that God is in the instructions? That the check list is the solution? That serving up a bunch of strategies is communicating?

Not once in this pathetic formulafest was creativity examined. Heck, it was hardly even mentioned. Except, of course, to say that "creativity is inherent in marketing communications."

What?

I've got news for you, Sparky. It's not. In fact, when it comes to integrated b-to-b marketing and brand communications, it's not even close. As everyone who actually does integrated branding programs day in and day out (as opposed to talking about them) knows, it's in the execution where most integrated communications fall apart. And don't kid yourself; they're falling apart all over the place.

Creative: Where integrated programs go to die Only in communications can you do all the up-front integrated strategy stuff perfectly and then watch it all go right down the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed. Or to involve the audience. The cruel reality is that no matter what you do strategically, no matter how good and integrated your process is, you're still going to have to compete with a zillion other rapidly disintegrating messages.

And if that's not bad enough, you're going to have to compete for an ever-shrinking span of audience attention and time. Overcoming the triple-whammy. You have only two choices to overcome that triple whammy. You can either repeat messages over and over and over again until they finally sink in. Or you can say them in such a fresh, new, surprising and relevant way that people can't forget them.

You can either continue to send out interruptive, repetitive monologues. Or you can engage your customers and prospects in dialogue that's of value to them and their business.

Engage is the key word.

Engage your audience before your mouth. It takes creative impact to engage people. To make them want to talk to you and focus their attention on what you can do for them. And in this new world where customers and prospects control information, communications and the buying process, engagement through creative impact is a lot more effective than repetitive messaging.

Because when you rely on process and repetition you not only waste money, you also lose valuable time. Without

creative impact, your message is relegated to the slow seep of frequency.

Frequency is osmosis or evolution. You wait patiently for nature to take its course and for your selling points to eventually seep in. If they seep at all. The fact of the matter is, in this new age of business communications, frequency is akin to waiting for Jimmy Stewart to recite the Mahabharata on the back of an arthritic tortoise in a hammock hung between two trees in the intensified gravity of the planet Jupiter.

In other words, it takes too damn long.

In the meantime, a competitor can zip past you at the speed of light and get into your audience's head with a new idea or benefit before you. Or even take a position or attribute or point of differentiation away from you. All they need is the right integrated strategy and the powerful engine of creative impact.

Creativity is lightning

Maybe it's time to start measuring the efficiency of your integrated communications efforts by their impact instead of just their methodology. And impact, my friend, is a direct result of how fresh, original and relevant your creative is. Despite the tremendous communications and marketing paradigm shifts that are going on out there, people will always stop, notice, connect and pay attention to a message that's fresh and direct and engaging and human.

Always.

Because people react strongly to something they've never seen or heard before. But it's not for spineless weasels creating an integrated communications program that stands out and has impact means running risks. There's no way around it. If an ad or direct marketing piece is provocative, interesting and intriguing, it will create an adverse comment or two along the way.

Especially inside your company.

In fact, you can count on it. Somebody in your organization will become as nervous and jerky as Barney Fife on a triple espresso.

That's when you know you've got something. If the idea doesn't make some company executive swallow hard, than you're probably not saying anything worth saying. And when his or her sweat hits the fan, that's the time to pull a Dennis Rodman and start getting aggressive on the offensive glass.

Don't go gently into this bad night.

When the people on the inside get nervous it usually means your communications is being direct. It's taking a stand. It's taking on an issue that resonates with an important segment of the market. It has power. Mostly because it's not hiding behind the obscure, the obvious or the obtuse.

Check your guts

Creative impact comes from stating a relevant message in a way people have never considered before. In fact, you can test your next concept for impact:

1. Does it upset the status quo? 2. Does it question conventional thinking? 3. Does it take people by the shoulders and shake them? 4. Does it remind them of how they felt, feel or want to feel? 5. Does it force them to reexamine their attitudes and their assumptions?

Being on the receiving end of any one of those communications can be an unsettling experience. That's what makes them impactful.

That's what makes them work, the value of standing out...

But after you've lived in the brand communications jungle for a while (as opposed to just talking about it) you learn that there are only two laws of survival. If you don't want to be eaten alive — blend in.

If you want to attract a mate — stand out.

Unfortunately, most b-to-b brand communication today is desperately trying simply to keep from being eaten. So it doesn't attract anything — except maybe flies when it dies. More standing around than standing out

If you don't believe that, just peruse your way through any business-to-business medium. It's like thumbing through a book of wallpaper samples. One message blending into another. Visual wallpaper full of unimaginative statistics.

Or simple regurgitation of stark, uninvolved selling points that the manufacturer thinks will automatically sell the product.

In other words, brand communications that simply put the product on a pedestal and describe it, and wait for the world to beat a path to its door.

And they're still waiting

There is a mistaken logic at work here. And it goes something like this: "If my program is like my competitors' (a euphemism for the curse of "benchmarking"), then I'll be considered a factor in the market and attract attention."

Nothing could be further from the truth. If you want to attract and keep customers out there in the business communications jungle, you have to concentrate on standing out. In every medium. Not on blending in.

You have to concentrate on being creatively distinctive and engaging so that people actually want to talk to you. Not drab, dull and transparent so people ignore you and have no time for you.

If you don't, your highly processed integrated branding program will hit the dumper harder than the Dudley Boys at a Texas tag team cage match with table seating.

Gordon Hochhalter, Partner, Creativitystrategytechnology, Mobium Creative Group www.mobium.com "I just wanted to be a shepherd."

Gordon Hochhalter has conducted twenty-five years of integrated marketing communications and business brand-building for clients such as NEC/Mitsubishi, Motorola GTSS, Equity Office, Armstrong World Industries, CNH Global After Sales, ONDEO Nalco, Technology Service Solutions (IBM & Kodak), Polycom, R.R. Donnelley, Westvaco. He is responsible for writing, concepting, visualizing, integrating communications, branding strategy and execution, research, facilitating and mentoring teams and overseeing client work across Mobium. He is a music-maker and a dreamer of dreams. Gordon has received over 300 awards from Clio, Art Directors Club, One Show, Andy, ADDY, International Advertising Festivals of New York, DMA Echo, LA Art Directors Club, Type Directors Club, London International Advertising Awards, BMA Pro-Com, Tower, Ace, Icon, American Business Press Objectives & Results. His work has appeared in Graphis, Print, Communications Arts, Business Marketing, BtoB, Advertising Age and Art Direction magazines as well as in The Library of Congress. He has been profiled in Who's Who in Advertising, Who's Who in America, Who's Who in the World, Who's Who of Emerging Leaders in America and Who's Who in Media and Communications. Gordon is a member of the Internet Advisory Board of B2B Works and the Board of Directors for Literacy Chicago. He is the author of five books on business communications, wrote a monthly column for Integrated Marketing & Promotion magazine and has written numerous articles in marketing publications. He is an industry speaker and holds a B.A. in communications from Brigham Young University.

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