

A little navel gazing

BY LIZ TORLÉE

Marketers only need to look inside their companies to see if their brand has resonance

Know thyself. It's been over 2,000 years since a learned Greek inscribed this on the oracle-shrine of Apollo but we're still not very good at it, certainly not in the marketing world.

In the quest for sustainable competitive advantage, most of the effort, time and money goes into finding increasingly subtle nuances in the way everybody else thinks, rather than in what makes a company special. Of course, it should now be taken for granted that the customers' feelings should be sought at every turn and their changing needs continually monitored. But customers are only one side of the marketing equation and, despite the critical importance of their perspective, they can never provide the full story. What about themselves? Those on the inside have their own story to tell and not taking this into account can lead to a marketing process that works backwards. Instead of being the impetus, the actual breeding ground for the brand culture and the ideas that should spring from it, the people on the inside are often the last to be consulted and sometimes the last to know about a brand's new positioning.

Here's how many plans unfold: Lots of heavy-duty research on the outside, agency briefed, customer-based strategy and communication developed, outsiders evaluate it at different stages and get to vote on its final form, then-off it goes to market. At some point, usually after the first wave of "tracking," someone realizes that people on the inside need to be brought into the loop so that the new idea consumers are being asked to embrace will actually be reinforced when they engage with the brand.

Astonishingly, companies are now popping up to help clients sell new brand positionings and campaigns to those on the inside. Yikes-isn't that all a bit late? After all, where are brands born? They may well have been sparked by a smart person understanding customers' needs, but there had to be another smart person to begin with- one who had an invention up his sleeve, an idea for a new product keeping her awake at night, or an improvement that would take a brave investment and crossed fingers. And then there are those who nurture and sustain brands- both on the front line and in the back room, those in kitchens and on production lines, those who pound pavements and develop relationships with retailers, those who answer the telephone and deal with customer concerns. There are countless people on the inside of companies who make a contribution to brand health and have a stake in its future. But it seems their opinions and feelings- and their invaluable insight-are rarely sought when they can make the most difference-at the beginning.

Some time ago, at an auto company marketing meeting in Detroit, the cultural anthropologist on our team asked what "the guys on the line" thought about a particular issue. There was a heavy pause and some diversionary coughs. I had to explain during a break that production line workers are simply not involved in these weighty matters. The good doctor was horrified. "You mean the people who actually make the cars, who see how they are put together day after day-their input is not considered?" I was completely unable to rationalize this anthropological heresy.

Often the most revealing research is done on the inside of companies. Every insider can shed new angles of light on the culture of a company and its brands, what makes it work, where are its fault lines. From the CEO to the marketing alchemists to the woman in the coffee shop-each has a story to tell. One of the first questions any company should ask itself is, "What are we doing right?" before repeatedly turning to outsiders to find out what they are doing wrong. It is often the stories from insiders that reveal the hidden strengths and secret weapons of a brand, the things people have come to take for granted or no longer realized were vital to success. There are so many different ways of mining this-from guided tours and informal conversations in offices, plants and cafeterias to more customized and structured ways of gleaning intelligence and ideas from a wide range of internal stakeholders.

Most companies underestimate the magic that already lies inside, the inherent power and potential of the corporate name and those who drive it, and the deeper-rooted equity in existing brands. Regardless of the approach, spending a little more time knowing thyself up front is a) fascinating, b) cost-efficient and c) very likely to lead to another lovely Greek expression: Eureka!

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