

Making marketing count Managing marketing in tough times

While legend may suggest that the first item to cut in tough times is the marketing budget, experience from many sectors indicates the enormous value that can be gained from effective marketing when times are chaotic and stakeholders are concerned and discomfited.

MARKETING ALWAYS MATTERS

In good or bad times, marketing centres (among many other factors) on the need for institutions to communicate:

- What it is they do
- How they do it
- How these issues might be of relevance or value to their stakeholders.

Marketing is not about spin or "selling", but is focused on the need for organisations to communicate accurately in order to enable their stakeholders to make informed decisions.

COMMUNICATING CONFIDENCE

Effective and results-oriented marketing is critical in difficult times. It is essential for organisations that are capable of riding economic storms to communicate their self-belief and future ambitions to their stakeholders and to build justifiable confidence in their proposition and service offer.

When organisations may be floundering, slashing budgets and introducing cut backs, two issues become critical:

- [1] The need to explain the institutional position, response to market instability and future plans in a way that will build (or retain) stakeholder trust.
- [2] The ability to articulate effectively the factors that differentiate the institution from less stable (or more vulnerable) peers or competitors.

Marketing can support the dissemination of this information, but only if it is working effectively across the organisation.

REVIEW MARKETING: DON'T CUT IT...

So, rather than cutting back marketing functions, a more valid response to tough times is to sense-check marketing processes for their effectiveness, return on investment, coordination, coherence and reach across the organisation.

DANGER SIGNS

An institution-wide marketing review will help organisations to spot the danger signs that indicate ineffective marketing processes which could be failing to deliver real returns on investment.

The critical issue to watch for is uncoordinated marketing effort across the organisation.

This leads to six problems that may waste money and time and which can undermine the communication of a coherent brand proposition to the outside world:

[1] GAPS BETWEEN CENTRAL AND DEVOLVED OR DISTRIBUTED MARKETING:

Check for damaging gaps (in terms of objectives and strategy) between central marketing functions and satellite operations (for example, faculties, schools, distinct sub brands etc). This can mean that the core institutional mission is diluted or that mixed messages are communicated by different sectors of the institution to overlapping audience segments.

[2] UNCHARTED MARKETING SPEND AND ACTIVITY:

Lack of awareness at the centre of the organisation about the type and level of investment made on devolved marketing activity. This can lead to duplication of marketing or outreach effort and advertising spend. It has been known for centrally unaccounted advertising spend to reach six figure sums in some institutions.

[3] MARKETING "DESPERATION" IN UNDER-SERVED AREAS:

Where satellite or specialist areas feel under-served (or insufficiently understood) by central marketing functions. This is often due to the restrictions of central resources, but often

forces satellites to develop their own responses to their marketing challenges. While this can work extremely well, variable results are also possible, with sub brands, faculties or schools, for example, struggling to replicate activities or functions that may be catered for elsewhere within the organisation (customer relationship management, digital marketing, market research initiatives etc).

[4] FAILURE TO SHARE BEST PRACTICE AND MARKET INTELLIGENCE:

Marketing develops silo-style and little opportunity exists to share best practice across the organisation or compare notes about what will and won't work in terms of marketing initiatives. This can lead to significant wastage in terms of effort, time and spend invested in marketing activity. A frequently documented problem from review processes is a lack of awareness across the institution of critical sources of market intelligence that could inform targeted marketing activity, new product development and portfolio management, for example. Critically, it also undermines the coherence and quality standard of marketing across the organisation, risking damage to the communicated brand proposition.

[5] DISTRESS PURCHASE MARKETING:

When marketing activity occurs as a knee-jerk response to crisis, rather than as a planned and coordinated strategically informed process. As a result, decisions may be made without expert advice and initiatives undertaken that can provide only short term fixes to long term problems that will continue to reappear over time.

[6] LACK OF EVALUATION:

When marketing activity occurs but its relative success is not evaluated. This is one of the most costly issues an organisation can face, as failure to evaluate marketing activity can lead to the cyclical repetition of ineffective marketing initiatives. It is impossible to know the return on investment made without effective evaluation processes.

MAKE MARKETING COUNT

So, in tough times, marketing may be critical, but the real difference will be made by marketing that delivers measurable return on investment and is coordinated across the organisation. For marketing to work well, every initiative has to count.

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Her consulting portfolio includes international marketing strategies; competitive brand development; location brand strategy; nation branding; business, foresight and policy response planning; competitor analysis plus digital and online strategies.

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