
Harnessing Your Customer and the Consumer For Success

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I recently wrote an article on how to create outstanding copy with your advertising agency as well as superior marketing-based initiatives which profitably build share. It occurred to me that the principles I set forth in that context apply equally well to all marketing and to the sales arena in creating outstanding business with your customers. I share these principles with you now.

The premise I espouse is that doing this is fundamentally having fun. The Greek philosopher *Plato* once said: “People rarely succeed at anything unless they have fun doing it... You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

So, let’s talk about having fun. Let me start with a caveat...I certainly don’t pretend to have all the answers—by a long shot—but several approaches have served me well over the years. Now, permit me to elaborate on my set of ten golden rules.

Rule 1 – *Develop with your customer a clear-cut model for what sells in your category from a consumer standpoint.*

Then, constantly refine and hone that consumer model in concert with your customer. Let me elaborate on how to accomplish this.

Become a student, a historian, and ultimately an expert about the category within which you compete and your own brands within that category. This knowledge must be a global expertise.

- What premises or selling ideas spawned the category—throughout the world.
- How did brands succeed and fail in the category—throughout the world.
- How did consumer usages and habits change—why did they change— throughout the world.

Let me illustrate with soft drinks and contrast with the coffee category.

Soft drinks started on two bases: (1) drug-cocaine-pleasure, uplifting, and (2) socialness—a date at your favorite corner fountain. The total sale was based on a positive, upbeat, issueless and pleasurable experience.

Initial driving forces from a copy and business standpoint were:

1. Dramatization of sensorial pleasure—from drinking soft drinks—a new, exciting dimension in taste/sensation/gratification.
2. Refreshment—uplifting /euphoric.
3. Ever-broadening availability—so that consumers could enjoy spontaneously at their own whim and fancy. Coke has said, “I want my product to always be within arms' length of desire.”

Over time, the social dynamic became operative and a new generation was created—the Pepsi Generation—young—chronologically and/or in spirit—but nevertheless—alive, vital, exciting, vibrant.

This reflected, insightful learning about the consumer and the category model.

Coke countered with “**Things Go Better With Coke.**” i.e., (1) Food, and (2) Activities/Socialness...all rolled into one.

I don’t want to belabor the soft drink business. Rather, I would say that some general rules emerged about what it took to develop great business building copy in soft drinks.

Lifestyle
Lighthearted
Upbeat
Positive
Social Approval—Necktie Product
Music
Film Production
Entertaining—hence pleasurable like the product execution synonymous with both the benefit and the user

Let’s contrast soft drinks to: *Coffee*

Advertising in the U.S dramatized problems:

Making it: Issue—troublesome; difficult—will it/won’t it taste good.
Caffeine: No benefits/pleasures of consumption—rather—makes me nervous and jittery and decaf is the “medicine” to solve the problem. Imagine...coffee was depicted as a multi-faceted problem! As a result:

- Coffee not fun anymore
- U.S. consumption dropped
- In the rest of the world coffee grew. *Why?*

Because the rest of the world celebrated the pleasure that coffee provides and segmented product usage by occasion. (Decaf coffee for a positive, wonderful, quiet and rewarding evening.)

Net—develop the consumer model and consumer mindset collaboratively with the customer—then learn more—then refine and hone it again and again. This is an endless journey.

Rule 2 – *Become a student of your category.*

- Watch it constantly
- Find out what’s working; what’s not; and why
- Classify approaches
- Consider which can work on your brands and why
- Use the resources around you—if you want to see what is working in the world currently—you can.

Rule 3 – *Know your consumer—intimately and with on-going zeal to learn more about him/her.*

Use Focus Groups; watch product in use; listen to your friends and relatives, use the product yourself. Net, thirst for an ever profounder understanding of your consumer and hi/her response to your product and competition—including opportunities for segmentation by usage, demographics, psychological needs, etc.

Rule 4 – *Be constantly aware of the world around you.*

- Social trends
- Societal trends
- Changes in fashion
- Interior design
- Changes in attitudes

Let it guide you in the development of how to present your brands. Also, constantly ask yourself if these changes present opportunities for your category, products, and brands.

Rule 5 – *Achieve and maintain a close and personal contact with your customers.*

I can't emphasize this enough. Business is built on a shared voyage of learning, thinking feeling, sensing, etc. This only happens as a result of strong interpersonal dynamics with your customers.

Rule 6 – *Dare to reach out.*

Urge yourself and your customers to achieve break-through sales. Truly record-breaking sales are spawned from audacity. Then, they are harnessed by reason and strategy.

Make sure you are psychologically prepared to generate a reasonable number of mistakes, yet have the confidence of ultimate success. I know that comes naturally to some people, but too many executives are so afraid of error that they “rigidify” their organization with checks and counterchecks. They discourage innovation, and, in the end, so structure themselves that they miss the kind of offbeat opportunity that can send a company skyrocketing.

So, take a look at your record. If you can come to the end of a year and see that you haven't made any mistakes, then I say, brother you probably missed a big opportunity. Odds are—you have not maximally succeeded.

It is a cliché to say we learned by our mistakes, but I'll state the case more strongly than that: I'll say you can't learn without mistakes! But...make your mistakes in the early stages when the stakes are small or you have a contingency plan.

Remember what Einstein once said: “A equals success.”

The formula is $A=X+Y+Z$.

X is work.

Y is play.

Z is the wisdom to know when to close your mouth—by not criticizing, but by nurturing and building on ideas.

Rule 7 – *Support your customers.*

This begets results.

Rule 8 – *Be decisive with the issues in collaboration with your customer.*

It may be true that there are two sides to every question, but it is also true that there are two sides to a sheet of flypaper and it makes a big difference to the fly which he chooses.

Break questions down into the key issues:

- Empirical evidence for some
- Judgment for others
- Live with decision until evidence to contrary
- Avoid at all costs the endless debates based on “theory.”

Rule 9 – *Learn the system—Manage the system.*

Forthrightly tell management what you know as fact, what you don’t know, and the balanced judgment you arrive at from the combination of both. Do it simply, clearly, and welcome counsel and input from others. You’ll get more done—thereby batting higher on a larger base of “at bats.”

Rule 10 – *Nurture your growth.*

Sir Thomas Newman—The Whole Person is but nine steps away! And remember...Be a leader as follows:

“If I could have only two qualities on which to judge a person’s promise, I would choose curiosity and determination. Only the curious will learn, and only the resolute overcome the obstacle to learning. Curiosity and determination—these I regard as more important than a person’s I.Q.” *–Henry Ford*

Winners vs. Losers

The winner is always part of the answer;
the loser is always part of the problem.

The winner always has a program;
the loser always has an excuse.

The winner says “let me do it for you”;
the loser says “that’s not my job.”

The winner sees an answer to every problem;
the loser sees a problem in every answer.

The winner sees a green near every sand trap;
the loser sees two or three sand traps near every green.

The winner says “it may be difficult, but it’s possible;
the loser says “it may be possible, but it’s too difficult.