

Agencies Great at Marketing Others...Most Horrible at Marketing Themselves

Although most advertising and public relations agencies are excellent at developing strategic programs, creative, and media strategies for their clients, they don't do a great job of marketing and selling themselves! Rightly, agencies spend the majority of their time focused on the well being and benefit of their clients, and use their resources for the betterment of their clients - - but rarely, if ever, dedicate the time and the same sense of objectivity to themselves.

Agencies do a great job of thinking about their clients' brands in very marketing-centric and focused terms: They profess the need to find the USP (unique selling proposition) and support it with meaningful and compelling reasons-to-believe.

Agencies need to do the same for themselves. Each agency needs to think about themselves in brand-like terms. Each agency is in essence, its own brand. While it is clearly more difficult to position an agency than it is to position a consumer product, the challenges are the same. Agency Principals need to be asking: What makes us different? Why does someone want to buy our services? How do we need to talk about our agency? Not asking these questions can turn an agency into a one-size fits all firm – which will make it extremely vulnerable long-term.

Once the right communication strategy is pulled together, the key is carrying that messaging through all touch-points that come in contact with clients and prospects: website, agency collateral, letters, employee attitude, phone conversations, presentations, and pitches to name a bunch.

I have long carried around an article first published in Advertising Age on July 31, 1995 titled: "Leo's Valediction – a call for continued excellence". The article re-prints portions of Leo Burnett's speech to his agency in 1967, shortly before his departure from the firm. In the speech he identifies all the reasons why he would want his name taken off of the door – many of which had to do with the agency not living by the principles that he had set – not reinforcing the equities he had established. I suspect that the troubles faced by Burnett over this past decade might have something to do with their taking their eye off of the "red apple" (the signature trademark of Burnett when you entered their shop).

The principle of creating and staying true to a positioning and backing up the positioning with work that supports it was central then (in 1967) and is even more central today. With so many agencies competing against so little space, applying basic marketing principles in an objective and thoughtful manner is just as key as producing great work for clients.

I have had the good fortune of speaking with 100's of agency principals over the past year and there are a few consistent themes that run through each of them which suggests there is still work to be done:

- A belief that “cost of entry” benefits are their underlying point of difference. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that the reason an agency principal thinks his/her agency is different is because “we have 20 years of experience, we represent the largest players in the industry, we are easy to work with, we always deliver on time....”. The list goes on and on!
- Never enough time to take the step back and figure out what the agency is all about or never enough time to market the business and develop new business leads;
- Less than stellar performance among internal New Business Managers. New business managers either over-promise when they come in (“have a great rolodex” – that ultimately runs dry), they don't have direct experience in the advertising/PR world (they were great high-tech sales people), or they simply don't have a well-planned methodology.

The common misperception is that “no one knows us better than us”. While this might be true, it doesn't mean that a little outside perspective can't be beneficial. The key is to make that outside perspective actionable and productive for the agencies efforts. Simply hiring someone to identify problems or issues without piecing together the right plan – or implementing a plan that isn't built from a foundation of strategy and marketing-centric principles will do agency principals little good in the long-term.

In the end, think and act like a brand. Carry it as far as you can. Plan and act methodically, and keep focused on building a pipeline of new opportunities that can help strengthen your agency's USP.