

The CEO needs to get his voice back

Look at the marketing efforts of most companies and, all too often, you'll see a disconnect and confusion between what they're saying and what they're actually doing. Not only does their marketing not help, it sometimes can actually hurt (along with wasting a ton of money.)

It's because the guy in charge has lost his voice (or doesn't know how to use it).

Being an ad guy (one of the best, I might brag) I was part of the problem. I always thought crafting the company's message should be left up to me. "Advertising is the public voice," I'd offer. "Let me be your conduit. Because I'm objective, I can speak their language and make a better connection. I can present your story more intelligently and more compellingly. I can find the big idea." (See, I worked on Madison Avenue and was taught that finding the big idea was my job.)

Parallel are my compatriots on the PR side: "Let us make sure what the media says is on target," they'll prescribe. "Put yourself in our capable hands, and we'll develop the right spin to excite the press about painting you in a favorable light."

Then there are the internal voices -- the VPs of Marketing and the Corporate Communications Execs -- who might say. "Look, communications for this company is what you pay us for. Let us do it. Go run the operations and leave the messaging in our hands."

Not trained as a "marketing guy", the CEO says: "You're right! You're the specialists. I've got enough on my plate minding the shop. I've got to deal with personnel issues, and production, and sales and customer relations and finance and competition and logistics, etc., etc., etc. We'll do what you guys recommend. Just make sure whatever you do gets us a good return on our investment and makes us look good."

But looking good is different than being good.

The problem with the CEO delegating (read--washing his hands) of the marketing responsibility is that now, whatever messages are crafted will be the voice of the author(s), but not necessarily his.

For sure, the pros he hired will go back and do their homework. They'll analyze the

landscape, do some research, and might even hit a genuine home run. The boss will be pleased because they came up with a swell idea, and the program might even win awards and he'll get some kudos from his golf buddies for his great new campaign.

But, because the boss hasn't created and owned the message, it's often just pretty wallpaper -- sizzle without any steak -- and not very long-trusted because it's not growing from the vision of the company. The vision that needs to be -- and can only be -- crafted by the guy who's in charge. It's perhaps the CEO's most important job!

Marketing people need to eat some crow.

PR, advertising and marketing communications people need to change the way they think about their roles. They need to stop trying to assume the leading roles, and instead step down to becoming valued supporting cast members. We're all part of the bigger idea called "brand" -- the promise (and experience) that will distinguish the company and its products apart from all others.

We need to insist that the power be taken back by the CEO and transform our role from that of super-heroes to that of advisors.

I now consider myself a market leadership advisor and see myself as someone who can coach and prod my client to reach a genuine AHA! vision of the future that he can embrace as his own.

Then, and only then, will our messages for the company be effective and integrated -- both externally and internally -- with everyone on the same page. The boss says:

"We stand for THAT.
THAT is where our company is headed.
THAT is the value we offer to our customers and why they'll keep coming back.
THAT is why we're us, and not just another one of them.
Are you all with me?!!!"

And then everyone says:
"Yeah!" (or else they leave).
And then the marketing people find great ways to convey THAT message.
And the public receives it. And the company delivers on it.
And the employees are happy because they're now part of THAT.

Isn't this branding stuff just wonderful when it works?

But it has to start with the guy in the corner office.

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