

Responsible for everything, Accountable for nothing

I once had a guy work for me who had made a cross-functional move (remember them?) from H.R. into Marketing. He stuck it a couple of years before heading back, his parting shot being that “a Brand Manager is responsible for everything, but accountable for nothing.”

He was referring, of course, to the nannying role that marketers must play in the Herculean task of aligning the disparate business functions behind an overarching consumer strategy. Though what he would make of it now, from his lofty position on the H.R. totem pole, defies imagination.

Marketers as nannies has been a part of the job since P&G first defined the discipline in the 1930's, but has subsequently become infinitely more complex, to the point where one must question its ongoing validity. What used to be an ability to run a multi-disciplinary project to time has now become an almost impossible task akin to herding a vast litter of naughty cats. There are just so many more individual components in being able to present a coherent and cohesive face to the consumer today compared to when the role was defined.

Firstly, the amorphous “Trade” became a multitude of different channels and then customers, each of whom had their own strategies and needs which, if not understood, opened one up the accusation of “Marketing being out of touch with the sharp end.” The alleged solution to this of a Trade Marketing Department has proved not only a disappointment, but a positive hindrance. I have yet to meet any Head of Marketing who

isn't either: a) arguing with the Head of Sales as to who should own them, b) planning to reorganise them if she owns them, or c) ignoring them if she doesn't own them.

This exponential increase in the complexities of the job has been further compounded by the parallel fragmentation of the media world coupled with the resulting explosion in agencies, consultants and the like who realise that the future is in specialisation as they greedily circle the festering carcasses of the one-stop agencies.

So here's my big theory on the upshot of all this: the job of Brand Management has now become too complex for any one person to be good at all of it. It is simply impossible to understand every single component, let alone run around directing and agreeing every detail. What suffers is the softer side of the job, understanding the consumer.

Brand Managers would once spend hours in research debriefs, quizzing the moderator on points of interpretation, out of which would come a deeper understanding. That degenerated firstly into a habit of not reading the full report, but relying on whatever charts the moderator had deemed fit to present. Then requests came in to reduce the presentation down to the management summary. Now, I am reliably informed by horrified long-serving members of the research community, marketers gloss over the management summary and simply ask, "What should we do?"

The answer is for the Brand Manager to cease to try to do everything: to become the conductor as opposed to racing round trying to toot or pluck every instrument. This would necessitate a combination of internal delegation and external outsourcing.

Disband Trade Marketing and set up an Activity Management function, leaving them to run implementation. Appoint a lead agency for every project, leaving them to manage

the other agencies. Spend your time understanding the consumer, and then evangelising the learnings to an aligned group of senior level partners – a brand “Board of Directors”.

The term Brand Management is an abuse of the term “management”; the current reality is Brand Micro-management. But then if it was called that, anyone who had any brains would be clamouring for a job in H.R.