

So is That a Go Then?

There are four things you need to be good at to succeed in a marketing career:

1. Knowing what needs to be done
2. Developing an appropriate plan
3. Convincing the business to do it
4. Doing it excellently

And of course it goes without saying the thing that the majority of marketers absolutely suck at is task number 3. Many marketers have no idea how to sell their function, their plans and especially themselves.

How can this be so? Aren't we masters of the art of persuasion? Errr....no. The problem is that we think we are.

I spent a significant chunk of my corporate career, not in brand management, but in sales, marketing services and business strategy roles, which meant that on many occasions I was not selling the marketing plan, but being sold to. And I have to report that it is not a pretty sight.

The first problem is that presenting the proposal is often seen as a status symbol, a motivational reward for having worked hard on the plan, rather than a specific task in the process that demands specific skills at a certain level of competence. However the plan is useless if it is not sold. So when you see callow youth of a Brand Manager stand up at the front, nervously clutching their cue cards, it's like watching a car crash in slow motion: the outcome is clearly going to be horrible, but there is nothing that can be done to avert disaster. No amount of interjections from the sidelines will quell the audience's

fear that the said deer in the headlights may well be as bad at thinking up plans as they are at selling them.

If that elementary error is avoided, the next minefield is inherent in the brand management system itself. When people specifically recruited for such attributes as drive, energy and enthusiasm dedicate every waking moment to thinking about, say, hemorrhoid cream; it should come as no surprise that they get detached from reality. They see only the positive. Every chart shown must highlight successes; every graph must have a positive incline; y-axis scales must be grossly distorted to make mere ripples in the sales of a brand look like substantial progress. The audience, having seen this approach many times, indeed many times on the self-same dog of a brand, don't shed their doubts and rise up in a hallelujah chorus; they merely sit, silently shaking their heads, convinced that marketing "don't get it."

The third and most persistent error is that marketers have trained the rest of the business to see them as wasteful spendthrifts, and then try their best to live up to that reputation. Marketers always ask for more money. If a brand is in decline, it needs investment to turn it around; if it is zooming upwards, success must be reinforced with more spend; if it is at cruising altitude, not only must the engines not be throttled back even slightly – or the plane will fall from the sky - but more funds are needed for some one-off tactical initiatives. However, such investments will not pay back in year one (well, duh!) but will create massive value in years 2, 3 and 4. Of course this argument lost its potency in about 1986 and is treated with the derision it deserves. "So if this is such a good idea, explain to me again why it doesn't make any money."

If you want to get your plans approved at budget time, do not rely on the brilliance of the plans themselves to win the day; the brand managers' graveyard is littered with the corpses of unapproved great plans. Instead, treat the task with the same seriousness as you do insights, plans and execution; show that you understand and accept your audience's perception of the problems; and guarantee you can solve them for less money than they imagined.