

Integrated Strategic Marketing

Making the Pieces Fit

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Many believe they understand strategic marketing, and most get the definition correct. The part that few fully appreciate is how to integrate the planning into the production phase. The implementation of strategic marketing is the focus of this paper.

The term "strategic marketing" is defined as a three-step process, but the actual work is far more complex, because the outcome of the planning must be incorporated into the messaging through a large variety of media. This eventually becomes the foundation for a brand.

Strategic Marketing

The three steps of strategic marketing are outlined below:

1. Planning
 - a. SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)
 - b. Market Research
 - c. Marketing Planning and Allocation
2. Implementation
 - a. Messaging
 - b. Strategy and Tactics
 - c. Scheduling
 - d. Action
3. Control
 - a. Assessment of Results vs. Benchmarks
 - b. Adjustments as Required

Since the implementation phase relative to planning and strategic messaging is the focus here, the control phase will not be discussed. Those aspects of planning and implementation that are primarily determined by financial considerations will likewise not be covered in detail.

Planning

The planning phase is the most crucial in several respects. The SWOT analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the product or service with a primary emphasis on the market and other environmental influences. Generally speaking, the strengths and opportunities made apparent by this procedure become the purview of advertising and promotion. The weaknesses and threats are normally allocated to public relations, government relations and community affairs programs.

Market research prioritizes the consumer. This stage can get quite detailed, but all market research determines the consumer's perception of the product or service, motivations for purchase and their demographic parameters. This information is then synthesized with the SWOT information to arrive at a plan for presentation with regard to messaging, methods and budget. This is a fairly broad definition, but these are the vital aspects of the method.

Implementation

Messaging is primarily made up of the strengths of the product and the opportunities identified in the market during the SWOT analysis. Features of the product or service are also important, however those are generally prioritized based upon the two above criteria and consumer research.

The five essential components to consider when developing your messaging are listed below with expository explanation in the following paragraphs.

1. Mission Statement
2. Positioning
3. Benefits
4. Unique Selling Position (or Proposition)
5. Credibility

Mission Statement – This refers to the mission statement of the organization. It's important that products or services offered by a company be perceived as consistent with the company's primary function. Any inconsistency undermines the brand of the company and credibility with regard to the offering.

Positioning – It's remarkable how few organizations bother to position their products and services relative to others in the market. Positioning creates differentiation in the mind of the consumer, and it's an essential element of creating a brand. The strengths and opportunities identified during the SWOT analysis are leading indicators of how to position a product or service and should be cross-referenced with consumer perception and motivation from the market research.

Benefits – The consumer doesn't buy products or services. The purchaser is only interested in the benefits a product or service offers in exchange for his or her cash. Failure to adequately relate benefits is tantamount to forfeiting a sale to a competitor who does a better job of describing their benefits. All too often marketing material focuses on features without relating how the consumer gains an advantage or improvement as a result.

Unique Selling Position – It must be understood by the consumer why a particular product or service is special in some way that can't be realized with the purchase of a competing product. Is your product/service better, faster or more reliable? Say so, and be able to prove it.

Credibility – The company must be able to state, or at least strongly imply, why it's a credible source from which to obtain a product or service. This is where expertise, experience and consumer confidence come together to close the sale.

Every person responsible for speaking on behalf of an organization, from the CEO to the sales representative, must fully grasp and know their company's messaging elements to ensure full effectiveness. The two primary driving forces behind my development of the Messaging Matrix™ was to make the learning process easier for everyone involved and to maintain consistency as future messages are developed. Everything from daily correspondence to casual elevator speeches are opportunities to reinforce the organization's messaging, and every single occasion should be used.

Over the course of time and with regular repetition, the recipient of consistent messaging will form a physical structure in the brain known as a "neural network." These connections between brain nerve cells are most commonly known as associations. The more a message has been reinforced, the stronger the connections between the brain cells become, and some associations will become so automatic that an individual can only stop them with great effort.

Production/Presentation

The production of marketing collateral and/or presentation of the company's messaging is where the rubber meets the road. As noted above, repetition is key to having a message remembered. Research shows that a person has to be exposed to a message a minimum of three times in order for it to be recognized once. Recall of a message requires a minimum of seven exposures.

How, then, is messaging to be delivered repeatedly without getting stale from overuse? This has been at the heart of marketing communications research and practice for decades. The answer is to construct the messaging in different forms with multiple media and formats.

A good way to conceptualize the above idea is a dramatic movie scene. Imagine for a moment the last scene of the film, Casablanca. Humphrey Bogart is sending the love of his life away on a plane for her own good despite his innermost desire to be with her. The expressions on the actor's faces, dialogue, musical score, lighting and camera angles all say exactly the same thing, "This is a painful and heartbreaking act of bravery."

Similarly, a good marketing collateral mix will use the strengths of each medium and/or venue to say precisely the same thing in different ways.

Once the messaging elements are properly delineated, they must be assembled in the most appropriate and effective way for the situation or purpose at hand. A brochure has limited space, and a television commercial has limited time. Both may share color schemes and a core purpose, but writing for print is very different than scripting for a voiceover. The television commercial has the advantage of using a musical theme while the brochure has longevity. By playing to the strengths of each medium, the marketing communication will vary, but the meaning must always be the same.

To accomplish this level of consistency, the planning must be thorough and referenced repeatedly as each new communication is developed. It's normal for a message to be refined, but it's rarely altered in an extensive way. A large alteration to previously

established messaging is very expensive and time consuming to achieve, so planning the value statements is of paramount importance.

The final consideration for the entire process regards coherence. In other words, all of the communications for an organization and its product line have to work together and strengthen the brand. Just as Russian nesting dolls must all be the same shape in different dimensions, so too must all messaging for every element of a company fit together as harmonious parts of the greater whole. Any perceived contradiction or inconsistency threatens the marketability of the entire hierarchy.

Conclusion

The above narrative is offered to provide insight into the mechanics of strategic marketing and its integration into practice. However, it would be remiss not to re-emphasize the importance of introspective analysis prior to initiating the process.

A caterer does not sell a facility, food and booze – they sell memorable events flawlessly executed. A trade organization doesn't sell information about the industry – they sell the assets and network necessary to excel in a career and achieve financial security. A television shopping channel doesn't sell kitchen gadgets – they sell quality, value and convenience.

Look at your company, product or service with a fresh perspective, and get to the heart of its inherent purpose and worth. From that overarching perspective, the steps described above will naturally fit together to create an iconic impression in the minds of your customers, associates and employees.