

Employees reveal truths about their brands

Thursday January 15, 2009

While marketing and product planning teams are seeking ways of improving corporate performance despite decreasing budgets, companies around the world are missing out on critical information that costs nothing to collect, and very little to analyse, according to brand strategy firm Toniq.

According to Toniq principal, Kyla Lange Hart, although businesses urgently need to achieve more cost effective operations, consumers also need their favourite brands to be strong, ever-present, and even to offer hope of a more prosperous future. Consequently, business intelligence, brand excellence, and product innovation are all important.

Interestingly, the company has found that incisive, in-depth, and interesting insights can be discovered within every company's walls rather than seeking new business intelligence at extra cost among the customer base. Individual employees - and particularly those on the customer-facing front lines - usually hold a wealth of ideas, experience, and knowledge about customer wants, needs, and of course turn-offs.

There is a way to reveal these "internal customer insights" (and potentially reduce the market research budget) by seeking in-house intelligence in a methodical, channelled way. In fact, it can be argued that the informed opinion of a committed employee who interacts with the brand every day is worth dozens of less engaged consumer opinions.

The steps that Toniq recommends for internal brand research include:

1. **Attitude**

Treat participants (employees) as you would paid respondents. Create a process, discussion guideline, and stimulus. Develop an interactive interview session that taps participants at the 'gut level' rather than asking them to recite data or present quantitative findings. Tap and collect their internal wisdom and perspectives that have been formed through research, brand and customer interaction, and experience. Also remember that people are more likely to give you their heartfelt beliefs if they are offered anonymity, so promote honesty through anonymity when reporting your findings.

2. **Participants**

Try to include a wide range of management and experience levels (e.g. senior executives, middle management, research, sales, global, and even your outside agencies for advertising, packaging, web, and media). Consider speaking with interns as well as administrative staff as they often have fresh perspectives and unique insights.

Don't be overwhelmed by trying to include everybody, but do try to achieve a balanced mix for a well-rounded result. Probe each core group for their distinct opinions and embrace each group equally. Younger associates may not have deep business experience but they may be able to offer more of an "in the marketplace" perspective.

A key group to include comprises managers who have worked on the brand in the past. They tend to have extremely valuable information that is locked away because they are no longer working on that part of the business, but their collective wisdom can yield some very informative insights. They also have nothing to lose by giving the "straight scoop" on how they believe that brand should be grown.

3. **Approach**

Set up your research sessions in a neutral conference room where you can properly set up

the stimulus. Create an environment that allows participants to discuss the brand creatively and emotionally.

Too often the corporate stewards of a brand are not included in the creative process that keep brands buoyant and successful, with this job being handed to outside agencies while internal management is simply buried in quantitative data and distribution details. This research should therefore include creative discussion so that management can also apply their imagination to the brand's strategic development.

Also, don't hesitate to use techniques with internal management that you've seen used with consumer respondents. Managers are also consumers, and they usually respond well to being asked for their individual opinions.

4. **A road map**

Allow participants to express both positive feelings and frustration with the brand's current state. Work with teams to express how the brand is at the moment, and then to imagine what it could or should be like in the future. You may want to use story-telling techniques or visual aids to probe beneath the brand's surface.

Try to understand the brand's most important elements and attributes, and try to discover how others imagine building on these elements to develop a vision for the future. It's also helpful to understand what is dragging the brand down, if anything. Ask participants to identify what is not working, what is confusing, and what is not understood in the marketplace.

Try to get participants to identify a direct competitors' brand attributes, look, tone, and feel, and then ask them to describe how your brand distinguishes itself or should distinguish itself. Use that intelligence to help identify new ways to distinguish the brand.

5. **Have fun**

Make the sessions interactive, entertaining and creative with a variety of information gathering techniques. Present stimulus that provokes an imaginative discussion, but still try to keep it clearly focused. For example, Toniq asks teams to talk about the brand in terms of its communications by presenting a variety of items such as watches or shoes and asking respondents to choose which most closely represents the brand now and in the future.

6. **Analysis and reporting**

When reviewing the results, look for repeated themes and imagery and let those help you to form and narrate the 'brand story'. It can be very informative to compare and contrast internal perspectives with outside agencies to help understand the views of each brand team (e.g. marketing versus research, versus sales, versus executive management, versus middle management, and so on). There is always insight to be gained when all of the teams are well aligned, but there is even more when the teams differ dramatically from one another in their views of the brand. When you prepare your final report, remember that everyone will want to see what the other teams said, so make sure that you preserve individual anonymity at all costs.

7. **Moderation**

If at all possible, employ an outside consultant develop, moderate, evaluate and present these points-of-view when the final report is ready. Even though there is a cost attached to this approach, the findings may be considered more "official" if presented by an outside source. Finally, if you have the opportunity to extend the same kind of research to real-world consumer groups later on, the results of the internal study will help to steer your external studies.