

Guest opinion

How to elevate engagement



By DAN MACK

"Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't; and the other half

who have nothing to say and keep on saying it." —Robert Frost

It is a maxim that has been proven time and again in our culture: The biggest is not always the best. Think about it. What do Apple, Neutrogena, Movado, Aveeno, Tom's of Maine, Swatch and Bose have in common? Although none of these brands are the largest in their segment of business, they clearly are the "thought leaders" and the cultural or growth catalysts in their class.

For all these companies, their thought leadership is their corporate identity, and it carries the day for both the retailers that stock them and the consumers who purchase them. These organizations understand on a very instinctual level how to connect and engage on both an emotional and functional level. They have found a way to capture the heart of the consumer and the retailer — and it is personal.

The growth catalysts in any industry accumulate, reflect on and incorporate keen insights into the dynamics of their business, while staying in a passionate dialogue with their core customers. They essentially nurture a monogamous bond with their valued customers. In a word, they are in covenant with their most valued strategic customers.

Growth catalysts also set the tone and the rules of engagement for all competitors. These leaders often are not in the mainstream; they frequently are characterized as before their time, and often operate in a constant state of innovation. They also engage their customers at the highest level, allowing for optimal brand development.

I recently sat down and interviewed a number of the top mer-

chandising executives with many of the leading retailers in America. During these interviews, I gained unique insights into the best practices and blind spots that many top sales and marketing executives are not aware of when they engage their customers. One quote from a senior drug executive framed it for me when they stated, "way too many executives are flying blind to my needs, my motives and how I do business." Let me share three of the unique blind spots uncovered during my research and the long-term implications of not addressing them.

Blind spot No. 1: 100% of the leading merchandising executives interviewed stated that many senior sales and marketing leaders don't really understand the retailers' goals, how

ating only on a transactional level. Executives must learn to create value outside of their product offering and utilize all of their tangible and intangible assets to help the customer differentiate *their* business.

Blind spot No. 3: 80% of retail executives interviewed stated that many leading sales and marketing leaders don't listen or affectively read between the lines during their engagements. This missed opportunity often hinders their ability to effectively influence their own corporation's alignment and understanding of their role with the customer. As one leading executive shared with me, "too often sales and marketing executives are rigid and leave the impression of working off of a script."

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they do business and why their strategies are important to them. In other words, many executives don't understand the customer's boardroom priorities, and are not fully engaging the strategic priorities on their mind. Many executives focus too much time prescribing solutions versus understanding their customers' context and areas of corporate dissatisfaction. When this occurs, manufacturers are not as aligned as they think, leaving valuable business opportunities on the table and not advancing to the role of adviser.

Blind spot No. 2: 100% of the merchandising executives interviewed shared that often sales and marketing leaders are not fully prepared to do business on the customer's terms, and are not providing enough meaningful strategic value. In other words, many brands are much more replaceable and vulnerable than they think, and often are oper-

As an executive, what do you do with these insights, and how do you strengthen your customer engagement strategy? The answer is to honestly seek to uncover your own hidden roadblocks while installing the following engagement philosophies into your corporate culture:

Engagement strategy No. 1: Design a sales and marketing culture where your customer strategy is deeper, richer, purposeful and more disciplined than that of your competitors. The winners have superior knowledge of their customer and have rich clarity of their customer's boardroom issues and strategic challenges. The leaders always are diagnosing customer problems before prescribing solutions, and are the best at uncovering and fixing problems their customers may not even be aware of. How do they achieve a position of superior knowledge and customer clarity? The an-

swer is by investing in and aligning your best thinkers with your most valuable customers. This also includes installing an integrated and disciplined sales process that uncovers customer gaps, allows for reflection and demands customer research by all individuals.

Engagement strategy No. 2: Increase customer transparency, proactive collaborative planning and co-creation while utilizing all tangible and intangible assets within your corporate cupboard. Leading growth catalysts stay on their customers' mind by constantly asking whether their corporate assets are meaningful and valuable to the customer. They also bring assets to their customers that address their unmet needs, increase loyalty and grow their national share of the segment. In other words, they focus on discussions that create new value and provide meaningful differentiation.

Engagement strategy No. 3: Utilize an enterprise-selling model that leverages the whole organization on the essential few customers that influence your business. The achievers stay focused on both product and in-store experience. The winners also ensure that all of their influencers have a significant but distinct role with their top customers. They are masters of walking the delicate line of serving as an internal influence for their customer within their own company, while remembering who pays the bills.

Are you winning with your largest, most valuable customers? And when you are engaged, are you providing the level of thinking, ideas and strategic value that differentiates you from all the others? Don't be so sure.

If you are interested in learning more about elevating your sales strategy, sales positioning or customer engagement, visit www.mackelevationforum.com or call Dan Mack, managing director of Mack Elevation Forum, at (630) 607-2774.