Be wary of the seemingly good deal

By Bob Lamons

ADVERTISING TO BUSINESS

Many managers today seem to be making marcom decisions on the basis of saving money, which is a paradox in our business because rarely does the low-cost alternative represent the best value. After all, the ultimate way to save money is not do anything—and come to think of it, that's also a popular choice these days.

Because I've fallen victim (and been a victim) to this cost-cutting insanity many times in my 30-year career, I've prepared a long, sad list of "deals" that might have sounded good at the time, but ultimately turned out badly for everyone concerned. They are, in no particular order:

◆ creating inexpensive logos (often by a friend or family member) that actually make your company look small and unprofessional;

◆ dusting off an old trade show display to save money, and then having the company president show up and exclaim, "Why can't we look like those guys?";

◆ letting an employee handle the foreign language translation for your product flyer, only to discover he translated "liquid" to mean "runny"—a rather undesirable trait;

◆ using free-lance designers to produce each new piece of product literature in a different format so it looks like your products are made by many different companies;

◆ giving sales reps their own cameras so they can take dark, fuzzy installation photos that you're supposed to use in application bulletins;

◆ going to a trade show that one of your customers told somebody you really ought to attend, only to discover it didn't attract any prospects for your equipment at all (including the aforementioned customer);

◆ running an ad in the annual big-deal issue of your favorite trade publication when you don't see the need to advertise in any other issue during the year;

◆ producing an inexpensive Web site that doesn't say or demonstrate anything useful so when prospects visit, they vow never to make *that* mistake again;

◆ saving money by writing copy for the

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Good marcom never skimps on quality, price

agency (don't get me started on this);

◆ investing in a young, inexperienced art director to produce product literature in-house and equipping him or her with thousands of dollars' worth of computer hardware and software (plus office space and supplies). When you divide the number of projects actually completed by the total cost, you likely will discover that the average is greater than you were paying outside sources (we won't even discuss the relative quality of design work involved);

◆ using the wrong magazine for your ad program because the sales manager was sure it was the one everybody reads. (It was—10 years ago. He didn't want to waste time and money on a proper media analysis.);

◆ eliminating the advertising research line item in a final budget-cutting step because "We'll know if the campaign is working or not." (By the way, this particular deal spells the end of accountability in our profession.);

◆ letting the sales force spend a significant portion of the marcom budget on customer gimmes that have no connection whatsoever to your key marcom themes and product messages;

◆ producing a separate brochure for every product type and market application when you could spend less annually on one general catalog and cross-sell customers every time you hand one out;

◆ refusing to develop a relationship with a full-service ad agency because you can get better prices by playing one against the other. They'll sharpen their pencils if they have to bid every project. (Compare this mindset to the "Let's form alliances with key suppliers to increase efficiency and improve service" trend your customers have pursued recent years.);

◆ deciding to go without a formal marcom plan to save money and be more flexible in order to meet rapidly changing market conditions. Later, things get so flexible, you have a hard time prioritizing projects and allocating resources;

◆ bringing the inquiry fulfillment program in-house and assigning it to a clerk who doesn't want the job or understand why it's important. Several months later, the clerk is transferred to another department, and you may discover a 12-inch stack of unanswered sales leads in the bottom drawer;

◆ using a direct mail list that hasn't been updated in more than a year to invite customers to a special hospitality event in conjunction with a major industry trade show—you're shocked at how inconsiderate people are when less than 25% RSVP. (Meanwhile, they're shocked that you don't seem to know their new address or job title.);

◆ refusing to spend money on location photography that would show your products in impressive installations—instead, you go with shots taken in the manufacturing plant with sheets hanging in the background, successfully achieving that bed-and-bath look; and

◆ thinking it's not necessary to invest in a trade media program because none of your competitors are using media right now. When one launches a major offensive in a key product area, you'll spend the next three years in a defensive posture, explaining plaintively how you're just as good as they are.

You get the picture, and I'm getting depressed thinking about all this wheeling and dealing. When you get down to it, there are no shortcuts to success in business-to-business marketing communications. It takes a lot of hard work to break through the monotonous clutter, but the rewards are great to those who can.

For my money, the best deal is the one that successfully communicates your message to people who have the ability to respond. Anything else is like flushing money down the toilet. ■

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