

## To Sell During a Recession, Shop a Mile in Their Shoes

by Jenny Schade

You don't need to market differently during a recession—you just have to understand your customers better, according to Mary Beth West, CMO of Kraft Foods (Advertising Age, November 10, 2008).

I couldn't agree more. I've been using customer insights to develop effective marketing programs ever since my boss at Golin/Harris International appeared in my doorway late one Friday afternoon. Suddenly he said the words that made me reach for the bourbon.

"We're pitching the Jim Beam Bourbon business," he proclaimed. "We've decided to make you the lead." Next came the challenge, "We're counting on you—let's get this one."

Golin/Harris was competing against two other major agencies for the Jim Beam business. Quite frankly, we were all large, experienced, and good. The question was obvious: How could we differentiate ourselves?

We held numerous brainstorming and planning sessions, but the big idea didn't surface.

When the pitch was just a few days away, I looked around at the participants in our agency brainstorming session: mostly women in their 20s who lived in trendy Chicago neighborhoods and who did not drink bourbon. And I thought about the typical Jim Beam drinkers at the time: males, interested in outdoor activities, living in rural areas. No wonder we were struggling to reach this audience!

### Picture the Marlboro Man, Minus the Horse

We decided to interview drinkers of Jim Beam and competing brands. The minute the respondents arrived for the focus groups, it was clear calling them in had been a smart move. These guys were obviously quite different from our female account team.

As we listened to the Jim Beam drinkers talk about their experiences and interests, we saw beyond the demographics to what really made these guys tick—the bonding among friends, their great interest in the outdoors, and the tradition of enjoying Jim Beam Bourbon that had begun, for many, with their fathers.

The focus groups allowed our team to get much more insight into the target audience. Our prospective client commented during our presentation that he was impressed that we had actually interviewed his users and gone beyond "a bunch of PR people sitting around a table, brainstorming and eating peanuts."

In fact, the groups generated the big idea that helped Golin/Harris win the Jim Beam business and ultimately led to a program that tripled in size by the end of the first year.

### Straight From the Source's Mouth

Ever since that unforgettable sip of Jim Beam Bourbon, my first course of action when developing a marketing program has been to get direct input from whoever ultimate success depends on—or, as I call it, Straight from the Source's Mouth.

"Know thy customer" is often referred to as the first commandment of marketing. Ironically, it's been my experience in 25 years of consulting that this tenet is almost always overlooked or, at best, receives a perfunctory nod. Countless organizational decisions are based on executive preferences or beliefs that have no relationship to the people who are absolutely necessary for success—the customers.

The unintended result is marketing that misses the mark or even offends. No one can afford to do that, particularly in this economy.

Just ask Johnson & Johnson's marketers, who recently suffered from a major headache when what they intended to be a clever online ad promoting their Motrin pain reliever actually annoyed the target audience. J&J posted an ad on its Web site featuring a voiceover of a mother who said she carries her baby in a sling because she sees it as being "in fashion" and makes her "look like an official mom." Instead of laughing and buying more Motrin, mommy bloggers were offended and called for boycotts. Within 24 hours, J&J pulled the ad from both its site and magazines and posted an apology.

Yanking advertising isn't cheap. Vinod Gupta, the InfoUSA CEO learned that the hard way when he had to stop airing his Salesgenie.com television commercial after its debut on Super Bowl 2008 because of protests about its culturally insensitive presentation. The cost of airtime along for a 30-second spot on Super Bowl 2008 was \$2.7 million.

Gupta, who wrote and produced the ad himself, didn't test his ads on consumers but only ran the ad by some friends. "None said it was offensive," he told USA Today (February 11, 2008). Salesgenie.com sat out on Super Bowl advertising 2009.

### Who Do THEY Think YOU Are?

What the J&J marketers, Gupta, and others have overlooked is that marketing isn't about who you think you are and what you need. Marketing is about who your customers think you are and what they need.

Developing a true understanding of your customers, as Kraft's Mary Beth West suggests, is a competitive advantage in any marketplace and particularly in a struggling economy.

An insight-based approach turns the traditional marketing model upside-down and actually draws customers to you rather than requiring you to chase after them.

In the case of Kraft, understanding that their consumers are busy and looking for food-planning tools that can simplify their lives led to the launch of the company's iFood Assistant. This insight-based marketing tool is now one of the iPhone's 100 most popular apps and No. 2 in the lifestyle category, according to Advertising Age (January 19, 2009).

Consumers are actually paying a one-time 99-cent fee for the app and watching ads in the process. Meanwhile, Kraft is collecting useful data for targeting its customers more closely.

As this example illustrates, marketing based on customer insights attracts the target, eliminating the need for inefficient expenditures and consumer pursuit.

### How Does That Make You Feel?

When I worked as a therapist and career counselor years ago, I made it my objective to feel what my clients were feeling, to think how they were thinking, and to experience what they were experiencing. What was it like to have that job or to be in that relationship?

To have an impact in marketing, it's critical to apply that same approach to truly understand the experience of being your own customer. In other words, "Shop a Mile in Their Shoes."

In my own consulting, I've "shopped in the shoes" of oncologists bearing the responsibility-mixed-with-hope of recommending a new cancer protocol, women of a certain age struggling with the physical signs of aging, and commercial real estate executives battling for new clients. Gaining insights into these customers was invaluable for a pharmaceutical company seeking a more collaborative relationship with physicians, for dermatologists launching the first prescription cream to reduce wrinkles, and a professional services firm that wanted to reverse a trend of new-business losses.

Harnessing the power of customer insights throughout your organization produces a powerful, ongoing interactive connection with key constituents that competitors can't duplicate. Beyond the clever words and attention-getting visuals, the connection with the customer truly engages. When the product has been reviewed, when the ad is over, it's the feeling that remains that makes the sale and keeps the customer.

If your marketing is based on customer insights, it's likely that your customers are going to feel understood—and therefore good about themselves. That's the feeling that will build the brand and drive sales.

As one Kraft iFood Assistant user wrote on the App Store reviews, "I've never really cooked a lot but these recipes make me feel like Rachael Ray in the kitchen! Thanks Kraft!"

And that's great marketing. Because—to paraphrase [Maya Angelou's insight](#)—people may forget what a brand says or does, but they will always remember how a brand makes them feel.



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