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he notion of "shopper marketing" has spawned a whirlwind of activity rarely seen in the marketing community. But amidst the tsunami-level of noise there is a quiet rumbling that all might not be well in shopper-marketing land. Big wind. Not much rain.

The issue is whether real, sea-changing programs are truly being activated at retail. After all the data has been tumbled, the insights wrung out, and the need-states defined, then what?

What, exactly, is happening to change shopper behavior to the benefit of the brands that have been expending all this time, effort and resources? Alas,

all too often, the end result is merely another FSI or promotional display.

Shopper marketing isn't about the shopper. It's about the retailer.

Except at Wal-Mart. In the land of the "sea of blue," real change is really happening. Successful marketers have established themselves in Bentonville to be close enough to Wal-Mart to foster true collaboration. This collaboration happens at many levels, including supply chain, marketing, and sales. Top-to-top meetings help facilitate win-win scenarios.

If this is working at Wal-Mart, you can bet the rest of the retail industry

will not be far behind. The implications of this cannot be underestimated because it underscores what some practitioners of shopper marketing may be missing.

And what is that? It's that Wal-Mart is a retailer. Could it be that shopper marketing isn't really all about the shopper? Maybe it's first and foremost about the retailer?

RETAILER INSIGHT FIRST

It's wonderful to bring shopper insights to retailers. It's very cool. But do retailers really find value in insights presented from a marketer's panoramic view of things like the "aspirational" shopper versus the "value" shopper?

What retailers want to know is how your brand can contribute to growing their categories or build shoppingbasket size as part of their marketing strategies. They need to improve throughput efficiencies at checkout and differentiate themselves from competitors. They may or may not find sustenance in our pontifical presentations; what they really need is for us to help them solve their business problems.

That's why brand-focused "shopper insights" may be far less important than "retailer understanding." If you don't know where Wal-Mart — or any other retailer—is headed, or how they feel about the importance of your categories to their strategies, no amount of "shopper insight" will take you there.

Maybe shopper marketing isn't about the softer side of awareness and attitudes; maybe it's more about the hard truths of categories and sales.

If that's the case, we need to think about what might be the logical conclusion. And that is that shopper marketing should report to the sales department, not the marketing department.

Heresy? Maybe. This notion certainly appears to be at odds with where the industry is heading. According to a recent Hub survey, 40 percent of brand marketers have shopper-marketing reporting to the marketing department, while just 25 percent say it is reporting to the sales department.

Maybe companies should reconsider, though, because Sales is closest to, and has the keenest understanding of, retail. Marketing people often don't have a broad understanding of retail because generally they are not tasked with going into stores and figuring out what makes them tick. It's just not what they were trained to do.

Another important argument for shopper marketing to report to Sales is that the primary evaluation of shopper marketing programs is R.O.I. The sales organization understands that the ultimate goal is to move product and drive growth.

Then there's the additional reality that 75 percent of marketing budgets ends up in the hands of Sales in some way, shape or form—be that trade deals, promotion or shopper marketing. So, if you're spending 75 percent of your dollars to make things happen at retail, it might make sense to spend the other 25 percent to make sure it happens. That's just Marketing 101. We can put whatever kind of lipstick we'd like on it, but at the end of the day, it appears that shopper marketing is really all about retailing. It's really about sales.

REINVENTING THE FUNCTIONS

There's only one problem with this picture. A big problem. In many organizations, the sales department may be close to retailers but is not tasked to sit down, listen, learn and collaborate with them.

Shopper marketing has to start with top-to-top meetings with retailers. The retailer talks about the categories in which the manufacturer competes, the challenges they are having, and their objectives with those categories and where the manufacturer can help. This is not a typical role that sales people are used to playing.

What's required is a cross-functional team to assure optimal outcomes, which might impact research, category management, and yes, marketing programming. It's not a pure brand sell and it's not about transactions. It's helping retailers grow their businesses. Sales and marketing people both now need to think and perform new and different tasks to fulfill the true promise of shopper marketing.

It's not about appearing smart and presenting research that proves it. It means sitting down with retailers, learning their business, understanding what they are already doing and what they already know about their shoppers.

Then it means determining what value you can add and returning to the retailer with a plan. The first step should be about engagement, building a bond with the retailer, a bond of trust. Otherwise, you risk having the retailer perceive that you are trying to sell them something and they are likely not to be impressed by your expensive, but perhaps self-serving, shopper research.

The end result might not be a brand-specific effort, but a shopper solution that includes a number of brands from synergistic categories — many times from more than one manufacturer. Isn't that what shoppers are looking for when buying your category — a solution? A meal solution, a cleaning solution, an entertainment solution, a get-me-out-of-the-store-fast solution?

Marketers should...

- → Start engaging retailers up front.
- → Stop relying on brand-driven shopper ideas.
- → Deliver solution ideas that can build categories.
- → Collaborate with other brands.
- → Provide a platform to engage shoppers.

Agencies should...

- → Realize that execution is everything.
- → Learn how to make ideas work at retail.
- → Invest in people who know retail design.

This cross-functional approach is behind what is happening in Bentonville. How do we make it happen elsewhere? Marketing organizations need to be refocused; they need to be prepared to operate on a more strategic level with their retail customers.

Annual planning should start with crossfunctional business planning in conjunction with top customers. Before launching research studies on new product initiatives and shopper-marketing programming, perhaps retailers should be brought into the picture.

This is a process of creating plans and programming in alliance with your top customers. The selling organization might well be charged with leading this process, because they have the closest relationship with the customer, but they need crossfunctional support. In some organizations this will require rethinking, re-training and even a whole new process of engagement.

These thoughts may bring a storm of protest. But before you blow me off, put your finger to the wind. Can you feel a powerful new front moving in?



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