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Give Yourself a Competitive Advantage for 2010 How to Get a Head Start on the Competition

By John Graham

People are breathing a little easier and optimism is up. Some “experts” tell us, “The worst is behind us.” Yet, spending time convincing ourselves that the “cup is half full” is both an irresistible and totally dumb exercise. It wastes personal and business resources, doesn’t change anything and diverts us from taking positive action. If you want to get a head start on the competition in the year ahead, here are nine tools that will help you make a difference in 2010:

1. Sleeping companies will be playing catch up. If you’re expecting the economic tide to float your boat any time soon, you may be in for a surprise. At least, that’s the way Wal-Mart sees it. According to an *Associated Press* story, the company’s chairman says, “I think this recovery will be a slow one.” That’s why Wal-Mart is on the move. “There is change and opportunity in a crisis,” states Chairman Robson Walton.

Wal-Mart, HP, GE, Siemens and many others are taking big steps raising their visibility, looking to the future, but also determined to capture more of existing business. Sure, they’re huge enterprises, but why not learn from the leaders?

2. Customer blindness causes most marketing failures. Most marketing fails because companies are more interested in what they want to accomplish instead of what the customer wants, needs or appreciates.

The iPhone went from zero to leader in the smartphone market in just three years, zooming past the “leaders.” How did this happen? The apps are the answer. For example, you don’t need to be a concert-going age to appreciate iConcertCal, the app that scans the music on your iPhone or iTouch and then gives you information on when your favorite artists will be performing in your area. And BeamME lets me email my contact info on the spot. Business cards are “me-driven,” BeamMe is “customer-driven.”

Whether I want to see the latest news, read a book, look for a coffee shop, make a reservation at a restaurant, play a game,

take notes, send a file or any of a thousand other tasks, I can do each of them with ease and convenience.

The iPhone is all about the customer, not the company that makes it. Maybe that’s why Apple is solid to the core. Doing whatever it takes to make a difference to the customer is the big job.

3. Never lose contact with customers. Weekly, the president of a new community bank sends an electronic newsletter to each of his 300 investors keeping them updated on what’s been happening. “This business is exciting and I enjoy keeping those who helped us build the bank engaged with the bank,” says Tony Nuzzo of First Commons Bank in Newton, Mass. Although he headed several banks in the last 20 years, it’s no accident that he started his career with Procter & Gamble in *marketing*.

Contrast Tony Nuzzo’s way of cultivating customers with what happened to the business executive who spent \$10,000 on hearing aids from two companies in just over six years. As mind boggling as it may seem, neither reached out to him, not even once. Why not an annual checkup? Why not helpful tips? Why not a satisfaction survey? Why not a little personal attention? Why not information on new, improved technology? Whatever the business, there is always much that is helpful in building customer relationships.

4. Keep the CEO’s hands off the marketing. While there are notable exceptions (Tony Nuzzo is one of them), most CEOs are so focused on “the company,” they have trouble seeing the customer clearly. Of all the incredibly stupid things General Motors Co. has done lately, featuring its “non executive chairman” in its “may the best car win” campaign (offering to return a car buyer’s money in sixty days after purchase) may top just about any conceivable list. Why spend millions of bucks on a crucial marketing campaign using a spokesperson who knows nothing about the car business and who was selected for the job by the government?

The answer, of course, is displeasingly obvious: you want his support for spending the government’s money on advertising. Good marketing requires objectivity and that requires distance and the absence of ego. That lets out at least 90% of CEOs.

5. Be wary (very wary) of marketing fads. And that includes the social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Just because something is the current rage and you don't want to be left out doesn't mean you should drop everything and wade in up to your eyes.

There is no marketing panacea and there are no shortcuts. Marketing takes time, energy and money. Unless you are ready to commit the time and resources to develop a following on the social media, for example, look in other directions.

If you want to be left behind, then don't take marketing seriously.

6. Watch out for pressures to separate marketing and sales. Salespeople are known to have "problems" with marketers. They see themselves on the top of the totem pole and marketers somewhere far below. They are poles apart.

Unfortunately, they seem to be further and further separated today. That's trouble. For a company's sales to be successful, both are needed. For each to reach higher they need to listen and learn from one another.

Both need to ratchet down their foolhardy arrogance.

7. Diversify your marketing activities. Marketing today is far more demanding than ever. In a word, it's *complicated*. It's a matter of following the customers, being where they are, offering messages that speak to even tiny market segments.

Sensitivity to the way customers think and behave is the marketing task. One marketing agency seems to be on the right track by surveying a client's customers to learn which hour of the day/night they want to receive eBulletins. In the same way, it's surveying hundreds of business people to better understand what they want in the salespeople who call on them.

8. Don't let "free" bite you in the end. It will do exactly that if you let it. The power of free is enormous, a pervasive state of mind driven by the Internet.

In fact, it's blinding. Free has power and it's what customers expect today. But don't get fooled by *free*. Just because sending 10,000 emails are free, doesn't mean they produce positive results.

9. Put an edge on your message. Bland leads to blasé and that's deadly. For example, give customers a guarantee that has teeth in it (*WSJ*, 9/13/09, "Why Hyundai is an American Hit"). The company lays down the gauntlet. It puts money on the line. It dares the customer to go elsewhere—and it works, as the sales figures attest.

Then there's GM's watered down and totally wimpish 60-day money-back guarantee. Who wants to buy anything and then admit they made a mistake? The issue is quality and a sixty-day "guarantee" is ludicrous, typical of a corporate mindset that always stacks the deck against the customer. It's as if GM is afraid to step up to the plate with an attention-getting guarantee that rocks.

Without a sharp edge, there is no message.

Whatever the economic situation in 2010, sitting around keeping our fingers crossed is irresponsible. It's time to stick our heads up and be seen. It's time to put marketing to work.

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