

AdAge

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE PLAYBOOK – HOW UNLOCKING BRAND MEANING CAN RESHAPE BUSINESS STRATEGY

To match how consumers experience brands today, we need to build them horizontally

By Pio Schunker. Published on January 10, 2024.

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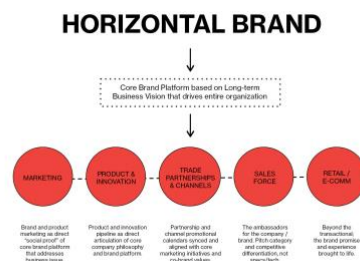
Today's consumer experiences a brand horizontally. They go to a retail store, call customer service for a problem, interact with the packaging, check out product reviews online, interact with the product, deal with the salespeople, interact with influencers and view ads. Each delivers a potentially pivotal moment. Together, they continuously determine the brand's place in their life.

Today's marketing model fails to take this into account.

We have fallen into building brands vertically, focusing almost exclusively on advertising communications. We translate consumer insights and trends into catchy commercials with A-list celebrities, debut on the Super Bowl and add the right reach and frequency in targeted media—then plan on celebrating at Cannes.

As powerful as it can be, that brand fame is inadequate. Media audiences have fragmented, while people magnify their other experiences on social channels. As a result, consumer horizontal experiences often outweigh, even undermine, a company's vertical brand messages.

We need to build brands horizontally in the way consumers experience them. That means considering the long-term growth plan, competitive dynamics within the consumer culture, the opportunity space and the one thing marketing must do to stimulate growth.



How can we get started? There's no way to answer it all within this space but here are the essential starting points.

Define the business you're really in

As a computer business, Apple wouldn't be a \$3 trillion company. The brand's preeminence across entertainment, music, phones and wellness came from defining the business as simplifying complicated consumer categories. That starting point enabled expansion into areas early Mac loyalists never imagined. It also established a compass for the entire business. While "Think Different" sounded a vertical call for the creative class, it also issued a directive for the entire operation—everything from product to UX to retail and customer care would differentiate by simplicity and ease of use.

Apple's vertical brand campaigns and expressions keep changing but the horizontal foundation endures. In fact, Apple really lives off its horizontal brand. Building the long-term vision throughout operations immediately prevents knee-jerk marketing every two years as management gropes for new growth avenues.

Turn your competitor's strength against them

When you make your competitor's strength an albatross, they won't challenge because they'd have to undo their entire business model to respond. Steve Jobs revitalized Apple by using the ubiquity of Windows against Microsoft. The seminal Mac vs. PC campaign made complexity the enemy and cast Windows' opaqueness as a form of oppression. Simplicity the hero gave birth to Apple the giant.

Find the heart of the brand in the business itself

Building a brand vertically from consumer and cultural insights produces a shallow foundation. What makes it a solid, enduring, expansive platform is taking the brand cues from the business and category dynamics. Glossier founder Emily Weiss realized beauty companies were limiting their potential by trying to tell women what to buy. So, she organized Glossier around listening to consumers. Beauty created by and for real women, and the democratization it signified, gave the brand disruptive power and purpose.

Translate brand meaning for every function across the company

What your brand stands for doesn't start and end with marketing. Glossier takes democratization across the entire business. Product developers ask consumers for their ideas directly, then work from those templates. Fans form the backbone of an ambassador-led salesforce; they're incentivized to convert more fans and bring their real-time feedback to product developers. The company's flagship stores emphasize trial and feedback, enabling customers to make their own swatches and discover their own beauty expressions.

When everyone across the company understands the brand meaning within their milieu and knows how to bring the brand alive, you can operate at 10 warp speed everywhere. That's horizontal brand power.

Marketing can't drive the business until it goes horizontal. The concept-to-Cannes commercial cycle will remain a critical expression, but business success will depend on our ability to define, design and deploy a differentiated purpose across all the experience points that determine how customers view and use our brands.

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