

WHEN LOVE IS BLIND

When pharma and agencies get too enamored of their products, they can lose sight of customer needs. **Fred Kinch** on the kind of devotion that can dazzle marketers, and tips for avoiding it

I recently heard about a yearly kickoff meeting for a well-known specialty pharma brand. The goal of the meeting was for the marketing team to lay out the promotional plans for 2012 and to get feedback from managers and field reps. Things progressed fairly smoothly, until the subject of being responsive to customer needs arose. A member of the brand's marketing team gently admonished the sales people for not listening well enough to their customers.

After this went on for a few minutes, a sales manager fired back, "You guys can't have it both ways. You say you want us to listen to our customers, but in the same breath you always tell us to bring it back to the product and deliver the message. Well, our messages aren't what our customers need."

What's going on here? Hadn't the marketing team and agency combed through their data? Hadn't they developed pages of positionings and messages? Hadn't they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop and vet them before bundling them all up into a well-executed sales aid? Of course they had done all of those things. They love their product. But you can love a product too much.

Enamored with attributes

Pharma and biotech companies love their compounds. They spend years and large sums of money discovering and commercializing these amazing pieces of science. It's understandable, then, why they focus on products' elegant aspects. But as they say, love is sometimes blind. And very often these companies and their agencies become so deeply enamored with their products that they lose sight of the fact that the only love that really matters is the love that customers feel.

Have you ever sat in a messaging or positioning meeting when you heard someone say, "We have to make this fact relevant to our target?" Or, "Our customers don't know how important this attribute is, yet?" While both of these may be true, if customers don't quickly respond positively after being exposed to your message, it may have less to do with customers not understanding your communication and more to do with you not understanding your customers.

The same may be true if your team clings to romanced articulations of your product's attributes. For instance, Pfizer introduced Zithromax (azithromycin) with an elaborate mechanism-of-action story. Emphasizing this aspect of the drug made sense, in theory—the MOA justifies why your patients need to take Zithromax for five days as opposed to the usual 10. Focusing on the MOA, however, came at the expense of the drug's obvious convenience benefit, the one that physicians, patients and pediatric caregivers cared most about. When Zithromax failed to gain traction in the market, Pfizer retooled communications around this obvious customer benefit and sales soared, beating the market leader, Abbott's Biaxin (clarithromycin).

Connecting with customers

How do you avoid the internal enthusiasm that can often cloud marketers' eyes to the realities as well as the needs of their customers? Here are five guiding principles that can help you to stay brutally focused on your customer's experience, both in the category and with your product. They may seem surprisingly intuitive, but in practice they can be shockingly difficult to adhere to.

1 Always keep the customer at the heart of your discussions.

Ad agencies like to say that they strive to know their brands better than their clients do. While this causes agencies to plumb the well-documented depths of the products they work on, it's in these details that you find the seeds of the kind of love that can potentially blind marketers. These exercises can be fruitful, but only as long as these attributes are constantly held up against and aligned with the true and un-confounded needs, whether stated or unstated, of customers.

Instead of asking, "What's our product's story?" ask, "What's our customer's story?" Ask, "How does our brand fit into or enhance our customer's experience?" And instead of, "How do we bring it back to the product?" ask, "How can we bring it back to our customers?" At every stage of the product's lifecycle, always work to keep the customer's experience at the forefront of the conversation to find true and market-growing alignment with your product.

2 Fully engage your agency's account-planning and channel-planning groups.

Often, client-side market analytics groups are overwhelmed with a range of research projects, of which only a few may relate to gleaning customer insights. These same indefatigable people are often spread across several brands, further

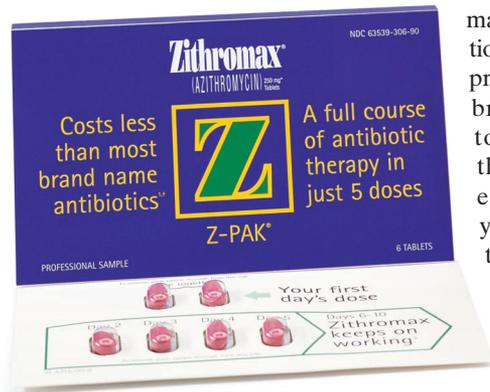
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complicating matters. Agency account planning and channel groups can go a long way toward supplementing these efforts.

Account planners also bring unique perspectives from the fields of anthropology and psychology that are not usually found on client research teams. Channel planning is designed to not only understand where customers get their information for media planning purposes, but also to understand the kinds of information they want and the way they want the information presented in each of the channels. Both of these departments are solely focused on understanding customer insights and ensuring that brands connect with customers in the most authentic and relevant way possible.

3 Consider the totality of the customer's experience.

In our single-minded focus in marketing, we sometimes forget that our customers have dynamic, evolving and multifaceted lives, both professionally and personally. Even within their experience with a single drug, there are many aspects to the relationship. When marketing products, all channels of brand promotion need to take the totality of the customer's experience into account. If you don't, your promotions can come across as at best naïve, and at worst insensitive.



For example, if your product has a great efficacy story but is hobbled by major insurance barriers, repeatedly sending in reps to talk about efficacy will quickly turn off your customers and demoralize your sales force. Keeping the entire experience in mind will not only endear you to customers but also help prioritize and focus your promotional spend.

4 Differentiation doesn't always require data.

Finding unique and wholly ownable data that differentiates your product is the holy grail of pharma marketing, especially since many categories are approaching a state of parity. Marketers and agencies spend countless hours poring over data sets to find a single nugget

to leverage, one which customers will find relevant and meaningful. But in the absence of a differentiating attribute, don't shy away from what other marketers do in consumer and B2B advertising: finding a unique customer angle that your product can serve.

Find the intersection between your attributes and the stated or unstated needs of your customers. It's a delicate balance, but just because one of your competitors can say it, don't assume that they will be able to do so after you solidify your position. That's what the rest of the marketing world does. What's truly different about Nike, Volvo or MasterCard vs. their competitors? Only that they understood and then owned what mattered most to their customers.

5 Pull through the customer's perspective in all expressions of the brand.

Produce communications that resonate with your customers. There's a fine line to walk. You have to talk about your product, not in an undying love, completely devotional way, but through the eyes of your audience, so that they will develop unyielding devotion. Is your positioning focused on resolving a problem for customers or enhancing their experience, or is it focused on communicating inward-looking product features?

Is your messaging speaking to their needs or yours? Is your advertising grounded in the world of your customer or in an abstraction that represents an esoteric facet of your drug? In short, if your agency presents ads that represent a "balance of efficacy and tolerability" in the form of a goldfish with shark teeth or a sword that's made out of feathers, get a new agency. Approach customers with a keen awareness of their realities and translate your communications and tactics into their world, rather than asking that they accommodate ours. This can go a long way with customers. Pulling through the customer's perspective doesn't take a lot of effort, just an empathetic ear.

So next time you're in a meeting and you hear, "What's our product's story?" or, "How do we bring it back to our brand?" or, "How do we get our reps back to selling the product?" consider turning to the group and asking, "How do we get back to our customer's story?" or "How do we get our reps back to listening to our customers?" or "How do we bring it back to our customers?" ■

Fred Kinch is creative director and managing partner at AgencyRx.

