



Killer Kickoffs

How to structure creative planning meetings to strengthen your marketing efforts

Your marketing efforts are under attack! They are costing more to produce and getting lackluster results, right? Your efforts must be stepped up in order to survive. In most cases, every marketing effort your company has produced could have been stronger, more strategic and garnered better results. Almost every time the culprit that keeps you from stellar results can point back to the kickoff meeting.

Every time you send an e-mail, solo package, catalog—any marketing tool intended to garner response—you should begin the project with a carefully planned kickoff meeting. This allows the creative team to collaborate strategically, not work individually in a vacuum. Conversely, a hasty, ill-prepared handoff can lead to disappointment and schedule-busting redesigns. The kickoff meeting is so important that failure to give it the time and attention it deserves can become an expensive mess.

Who should be involved? Anyone who has a stake in creating results. This means at least the product manager, designer, copywriter, production manager and even the marketing strategist. Yes, a marketing representative needs to be at the kickoff meeting. Marketers are typically not involved, and this is a big mistake because they provide strategic input that can bring clarity to the “who, what and why” of the effort.

As for who is in charge, it tends to work best for whoever owns the

product development (merchandiser, product manager, etc.) to lead the way. This individual is in the best position to explain the unique features and benefits to the rest of the team.

As you prepare for your next creative kickoff meeting, consider using the following checklist. In fact, a customized checklist, suited to your brand, should be sent to all

- What are the goals in terms of response rate or overall sales, and how is the offer going to help reach those goals?

✓ Audience

- Who is getting this piece, and what is his relationship to your company? The message that you send to a customer should be drastically different from the message you send to a prospect, who may not even know who you are.

- Encourage the team to think about the individual person behind the demographics. What will motivate him? What is his attitude toward what you are selling?

- What key words can you use to speak directly to his needs?

✓ Brand

- Your brand isn't your logo; it's the consumer's perception of your company. How can you remind—or for a prospect,

introduce—the recipient of your unique point of differentiation?

- How can you prove that you are delivering on your brand promise?

- What words and visual cues can you use to reiterate your brand?

✓ Format

- What is the format, and why was it chosen? This is especially important to explore when using a solo pack-

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participants prior to the meeting so thoughtful preparation occurs.

✓ Offer

Remember, an offer can be a full-price product with special value.

- Why was it created?
- What problem will it solve for the customer?
- What are we asking the customer to do?
- What is the overall strategy?

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age including multiple components. Explore each component, discussing the hierarchy of each piece.

- Can the format be improved? Your production manager may be able to explain important options and opportunities as ideas are generated.

✓ Creative

- What visuals will help grab attention and quickly explain your offer?

- Where are the hot spots in your format, and how will you use them to your advantage?

- How will you exploit an offer and make sure it is seen?

- How many times will the offer be repeated and where?

- How will the recipient process the piece—what will he look at first? If it's a mailing, how will the envelope entice him to open it? If it's a postcard or e-mail, how will you identify or introduce yourself at a glance and answer for the consumer, "What's in it for me?"

- What copy will intrigue the reader the most?

- How much copy will be required and at what ratio to images?

- How can you show value in every product? Is it necessary to include additional insets or callouts to show-case benefits?

- Review the creative and production schedules: Who will work on the piece first; who will work on it second?

- What is the proofing and editing process?

- Together, create a list of must-haves: phone number, URL, fax and registered trademarks.

- Are multiple versions necessary to accommodate different customer segments?

✓ Attitude

Finally—and of equal importance to everything listed above—an attitude of collegiality is absolutely essential. It's unlikely that all participants will

agree on all points, so mutual respect and consideration will go a long way to making any disagreements solvable. If and when this division occurs, look to the original offer, brand and strategy, and in most cases, the answer will become apparent.

There is no guarantee that your project will run smoothly from beginning to end, but with the right beginning—a forum that allows all involved to leave with an understanding of the offer, audience, brand position, format and creative strategy—you can head off time-consuming misunderstandings and frustrations. Take the time to talk through all of these points before the design process begins, and your program will generate better results. ■

Lois Boyle-Brayfield is president and chief creative officer of the Mission, Kan., direct marketing agency J. Schmid & Associates. You can reach her by e-mail at loisb@jschmid.com.

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