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BUSINESS
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When The Tail Wags The Dog

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By Deborah Daily, Co-Owner, Buckaroo Marketing/New Media,

We had carefully studied the client's stated objectives and analyzed the budget, then created a strategy that addressed both with great efficiency. So we were startled when our plan was completely tossed out the window.

The reason? One of the executives walked into the meeting and said he really liked a particular technology, so using that technology became the new plan. Why employ strategy when you're captivated by a shiny object? It didn't matter that the shiny object wasn't capable of displaying what the company's objectives called for. It didn't matter that the shiny object required more money than the company had planned to spend. Nor did it matter that the executive wasn't directly responsible for marketing and hadn't contributed to developing the strategy.

What really bothered me was that I know the target audience backwards and forwards. Through my work with the client, I've talked with the people who specify and buy the company's products. I've read the research about what motivates them. And I know without hesitation that this audience reacts poorly to shiny objects. They want solid facts and clear evidence, not gloss and glitter.

But he liked the shiny object, so gloss and glitter it will be. Six months from now, we'll all be in a meeting wondering why the project didn't accomplish its objectives.

Do I believe the executive has a right to his opinion and preferences? Absolutely. We all do. But what he lost sight of was the fact that he wasn't representative of the target audience. He had very little in common with them. Their job was to choose equipment that would make their operations fast, productive, and reliable. They wanted solid proof that our client's products were up to the task, not a dazzling and beautiful presentation piece that could easily be faked.

It's one of those things I've seen happen far too frequently. Someone on the team wants to do something because they personally like it. Never mind that it won't mesh with the strategy. "Let's create an animated presentation for the sales team." We can, but the sales team told us what they really need is quick access to technical reference material. "This is a great magazine, so we should advertise monthly." That's fine, but the circulation audit says it doesn't go to your customers. "We should put a wacky video about our product on our home

page so it goes viral." Okay, but who's going to forward a hilarious clip about industrial grease traps? Time after time, what should be a powerful dog delivering a strong message gets yanked around by its tail and winds up whimpering weakly.

What's particularly vexing is that these ideas tend to come from people in roles that usually rely on facts and realities, such as engineers and financial folks. It's as though they view marketing as a playground where rules don't matter and anything goes. Sure, you can handle your marketing efforts that way. Or you can simply throw your money in the trash. Both will create the same results. One just takes longer to get there.

Successful marketing efforts begin with two things: a realistic understanding of what you offer in your marketplace, and knowledge of what your audience needs from you. The role of marketing is to connect the two as cost-effectively as possible. There's no room for fluff. Whether your prospective customers are manufacturing managers, specifying engineers, service technicians, surgeons, homeowners, or fast-food operators, they're busy people who have clearly defined needs and want specific types of information delivered through specific channels. That takes serious research and analysis, not decisions made based on your gut or what amuses you.

Your personal preferences should have no bearing on the channels and strategies you use -- unless those preferences are identical to those of your target audiences. When it comes to capturing the attention of and convincing your audience, it doesn't matter what you like or what you think is effective. What matters is what's meaningful to them. What matters is what they want to do.

If a client decides the best approach is that the tail should wag the dog, we'll reluctantly help them put that tail in motion -- but we'll also document our objections. Not to say "I told you so," but to add strength to the renewed push we'll make for a strategy-based approach when the shiny objects inevitably fall short of the goal.

Deborah Daily is co-owner of Buckaroo Marketing/New Media.

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