

SPECIALTY ADVERTISING...CARRYING THE MESSAGE

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Specialty advertising has long been on the low end of the marketing communications totem pole. In many instances, it has been used only for two purposes -- handouts for trade shows and handouts for sales people.

It is therefore no surprise that the most widely used specialty items are poly bags, badges and pens. In recent years though, more sophisticated marketeers have used specialty items -- which generally have only intrinsic value as an integral part of their marketing and communications efforts.

Remember Apple's famed 1984 ad?

While the ad only ran once during the Super Bowl game, viewers across the country and around the world saw Apple's colorful logo throughout the game. Apple had purchased stadium cushions which were placed on the bleachers. Viewers were not only barraged with the Apple logo but the cushions became collector's items.

Verbatim once set up a public relations program of honoring more than a dozen budding California artists by producing one painting each month in limited quality posters.

The requests for the posters from dealers and users were beyond management's wildest dreams. Even today in IS and network management areas, company departments, dealer showrooms and office lobbies, these art prints can be seen mounted and framed...a continual reminder of Verbatim.

On the upper end of the spectrum, food chains across the country are quick to have tie-in promotions with movies such as The Lion King, Jurassic Park, Star Trek and others. Nike has made a major commitment to soccer on a global basis.

No these aren't "lucky" specialty advertising campaigns. They are part of a carefully planned, overall campaign.

Establish Objectives

Before you open your first specialty catalog or order your first pen, do as you would with any part of your marketing and communications program. Determine the purpose of the campaign and determine what results you want to achieve. Be more specific than saying that you want to get your name in front of people or increase sales.

Sales promotion objectives should be designed to motivate salespeople, distributors and dealers as well as aid in merchandising and increasing sales. The following list will help you develop specific specialty objectives for your firm and your products:

- ❖ Introduce a new product
- ❖ Increase the number of sales calls
- ❖ Generate product/company excitement
- ❖ Stimulate distributor sales
- ❖ Keep the company uppermost in the minds of reps so they make more calls for you
- ❖ Capture distributor interest and enthusiasm
- ❖ Increase reseller shelf frontage
- ❖ Serve as door openers with resellers, major corporate accounts
- ❖ Promote in-store displays
- ❖ Generate new retail accounts and larger unit sales
- ❖ Get important sales points across
- ❖ Produce broad-line sales
- ❖ Build name recognition
- ❖ Build brand franchise

Once objectives are established, you're read to look at creative specialty advertising alternatives that will support and help achieve those objectives

Enhancing Other Marketing Efforts

More and more firms are using specialty ad items in conjunction with other marketing/communications efforts.

For example, one firm used specialty items in conjunction with a sales contest. The company conducted two "racing to victory" contests last year with prizes ranging from plaques to TV sets to golf club sets to vacation trips. Since the company was asking for a strong push and commitment from the sales force, they developed a low-cost monthly newsletter that was sent to the homes of the salespeople. Included with the newsletters were inexpensive specialty items including running shoe key rings, running shoe money/key holders, specially imprinted towels, care compass key rings, running caps, t-shirts and similar items. The ideas was to continually remind family members what the individual was pushing so hard for and to enlist the complete household's cooperation, support and encouragement.

Another firm in the software industry had to stimulate the distributor's sales force and dealers to more aggressively promote the company's product over the competition. The company targeted 2,500 individuals/organizations and ran the event for six months using more expensive specialty items including:

- ❖ A letter announcing a better deal from XYZ along with a deck of cards promoting the company and individual products
- ❖ A letter announcing better discount and commission programs which the recipient could easily determine using the enclosed credit card-sized calculator

- ❖ A letter announcing a more organized means of helping the firms sell more of their software included with a personal organizer
- ❖ A letter announcing a program that would put more money in their pockets along with quantities of pens filled with shredded money. The pens could be used to write orders and to give to sales people to remind them of the company's commission program

The company has made specialty advertising a tightly woven part of their overall communications program to reach distributor and reseller personnel. The result has been a steady increase in sales.

For a number of years we worked with a major software firm that sold products and systems through a growing network of value-added resellers. Every year the company conducted a three-day world summit meeting for authorized resellers.

The company enlisted the assistance and cooperation of complimentary hardware firms that had products that were compatible with their software. Since the event draws more than 750 major and highly qualified VARs from around the globe, companies aggressively seek the opportunity to participate and support the annual event. The company has also invited key industry analysts to make major presentations as well as presentations from co-sponsors and their own staff.

Each year attendees received laser etched gift items including desk calendar holders, paper clip holders, pen sets, coaster sets, and similar items. Supporting firms also provide attendees with leather note folders and pens, vinyl and canvas attaches, golf and tennis shirts and other items. The company coordinates all of the hand-outs to make certain manufacturers don't duplicate efforts and that the items meet their quality and image standards.

Over a period of years, attendees have collected a complete matching desk set. The annual event has produced one of the strongest and most loyal group of resellers in the industry. We have been told that a number of people in the industry are proud that they have complete sets indicating that they are long-time members of the firm's reseller team.

Because capturing mindshare with editors, reporters and industry analysts is not only important but increasingly difficult at major trade shows, we have initiated focused specialty advertising programs just for the press with a number of clients. These include:

- ❖ placing company press kits inside silk-screened vinyl attaches
- ❖ placing press kits inside silk-screened under-arm portfolios
- ❖ imprinting the covers of reporter note pads and making them available in quantities in the press room
- ❖ quantities of specially printed post-it pads available in the press room
- ❖ specially printed 10 minute calling cards adhered to press kits

Some people may look down their noses at these items as gimmicks. But with press rooms having 200 or more company press kits sitting in bins they key is to capture the media's attention so they will at least skim your "news." As editors walk down the row of press folders it's difficult, if not impossible, for them to distinguish good from bad, news from flackery, strong from also-ran firms.

Companies need to do everything possible to gain a few minutes of this important audience's time. Each editor, reporter or analyst can influence hundreds of thousands of prospective dealers and customers. Firms need to insure they get their unfair share of coverage.

Taking a Creative Approach

Companies have become more creative in the types of specialty items they use in their programs. And they are carrying on more programs each year.

Take an Internet software firm:

- ❖ at a recent conference, users were invited to a special group meeting and received emblazoned sweatshirts
- ❖ resellers received custom-printed golf shirts
- ❖ booth hand-outs included Post-It pads that promoted the company, specific products and product messages

At almost every trade show now companies pass out t-shirts promoting new products

At another show we saw:

- ❖ Companies running special programs that made people visit product sales presentations around the booth to get special cards stamped so they could receive stuffed animals
- ❖ Firms holding drawings for 3/4-scale race cars. People filled out information cards and placed them in the drawing. At the end of the show a winner was chosen at random
- ❖ Bottled water and water bottle hand-outs -- trade shows can be tough on the system and drinking lots of water helps people make their way successfully through the marathon event
- ❖ Artistic mouse pads (much better than blatant promotion pads) with the firm's URL tastefully printed on it
- ❖ Laminating stations where the company would provide attendees with two laminated luggage tags using their business cards and a back-up card on the company's products and contact information
- ❖ special trade show survival kits including aspirin, stomach tablets, bandaids and similar items
- ❖ In each of these instances, the objectives were the same:
- ❖ obtain information about the attendee for follow up rather than simply hand out a bunch of literature that seldom made it to the booth visitor's office
- ❖ get the company's name and products in front of prospects both at the show as well as when the return to their offices

Year-Around Programs

Other firms have year-around specialty programs. Corporate executives visiting the firm's headquarters, attendees at sales seminars and people attending reseller and customer training programs receive utilitarian gifts including coffee cups/mugs, imprinted ceramic coasters, quality leather portfolios and note pad folders and specially embroidered golf shirts or jackets.

To help people "see the light," companies have used disposable pocket or key ring flashlights (I have at least a dozen) or foot candles (candles in the shape of a foot).

While pens of various shapes, sizes and qualities are still widely used, two of the hotter items are credit card solar calculators and telephone call credit cards. These units have dropped significantly in cost, have adequate area for the company/product message and are seldom thrown away.

In the tough and fast-moving computer, communications and Internet industries one of the most germane items we've seen in recent years is the stress card. By placing your thumb or finger on the proper area of the card, the color will change telling you whether you are calm and relaxed or highly stressed. Firms can put their advertising message on the reverse side to tell users that if they want to reduce stress...buy the company's products.

Planning, Execution

As you can see, specialty advertising programs go far beyond poly bags and pens. But to be successful, they must be carried out with a sound set of objectives in mind. You can't afford to view them as "throw-away" or hand-out junk activities.

Just as with every advertising and marketing activity, the specialty advertising program should be enthusiastically positioned and sold to your sales force and channels of distribution. The quickest way to kill the program is to simply dump a quantity of specialty items on the salesperson's desk or doorstep.

Just as a product or ad has a life cycle, so do specialty ad campaigns.

Most have a useful life of about three months. After that retire the campaign and bring on the second campaign to rejuvenate your program.

Don't be myopic in the type of program you develop. Rather than looking at a specialty advertising item and saying "this is what I want to give," take a long hard look at your target audience. Profile who they are, their personal and professional interests, their "hot buttons" and the image they will have of you and your company when they receive the items.

At times, you may be better off not trying to reach your entire prospect market with a single specialty advertising item. Instead, select items that appeal to sub-segments.

Keep in mind that the medium is the message. A poorly chosen medium can send a message that you either don't care about the people you are giving them to or your company and products are of poor quality.

To you it may simply be a key ring, a poly bag, a pen or note pad folder. But to the recipient it represents your organization's image.

In today's aggressive marketplace, your image is the only thing you can say with confidence that you own.

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