

Exploring the Territory Known as No Brand's Land by Tim Riesterer

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Marketing executives spend millions building their company's brand in the marketplace. But, are they spending it in the right place?

According to a recent Booz Allen Hamilton study, 85% of brand loyalty is created at the point of sales contact and after; only 15% is generated by up-front promotions and the quality of the product itself.

That means a brand marketer's greatest (and perhaps most overlooked) asset in creating brand equity and impact is the frontline sales person. But if you ask 100 CMOs for a peek at their brand-building budgets, you'd probably see expenditures allocated completely opposite to what the study suggests really drives brand purchase decisions.

Brand marketers continue to pump big bucks into 30,000-foot ad campaigns while doing next to nothing to deliver relevant, brand-supporting messages at the all-important 3.5-foot level—the distance between a company's sales voice and a prospect's purchase decision.

So, what gives?

The answer probably lies somewhere between (1) the unwillingness of major branding firms and brand managers to go further "downstream" with their strategic recommendations and (2) the lack of useful tools to get them there.

Welcome to No Brand's Land

Increasingly, a company's branding success depends less on what they sell, and more on how they sell it. In a highly competitive market, with near parity products and barely discernible branding campaigns, sales channel effectiveness is the new key to branding success.

According to Evan Hirsh, author of the book *Channel Champions*, the channels by which goods are marketed and distributed have become the new corporate drivers. "From these channels flow customer satisfaction, market share, revenue gains, and profitability," he writes.

Some branding experts seem to be coming around to the fact that the power to make or break your brand-building effort lies not in the quality of your advertising but in the customer's experience at the point of sale.

"If you don't control the last 18 inches of the sales process, you will lose," says Scott M. Davis, Managing Director of the Chicago office of Prophet, a brand/business consulting firm and author of *Brand Asset Management*. "Channel member effectiveness in closing the sale is what separates great brands from others."

Sergio Zyman, author of *The End of Marketing As We Know It*, agrees: "In all categories, customers are making more brand decisions closer to the point of sale—ever heightening the value of effective communications in that area. Your sales channel either adds or subtracts value from your brand or positioning every time they talk to a customer. They are not neutral. Every message they send is either selling or un-selling your solution."

Even if brand marketers accept the need to move their strategies further "downstream" into the channels, they are still puzzled by exactly how to adapt their 30,000-foot brand strategy to the needs of sales people delivering personalized positioning, presentations and proposals at the

3.5-foot level. They find themselves in No Brand's Land—the gap between traditional “one-to-many” mass branding efforts and the “one-to-one” world of interpersonal selling.

On one side of No Brand's Land, brand marketers can control all of the execution, ensuring the advertising campaign is right on, the media coverage generated by your PR firm is consistent, the trade show booth integrates nicely, your Web site looks the same, and your corporate design guidelines are in place.

But on the other side of the No Brand's Land, sales people are still doing their own thing. They are cutting and pasting from old proposals with outdated information and incorrect messages. They're fabricating homegrown collateral tools and PowerPoint presentations that are, at best, inconsistent with corporate positioning, or worse, downright inaccurate.

Most frightening for brand marketers is that these cobbled-together documents have to walk the halls of prospective customers, representing the company's brand at the most critical points in the sales process. Ouch.

Adding insult to injury, the field-fabrication virus spreads exponentially as this bad information is perpetuated across the channel on the brand's intranet.

Crossing Over No Brand's Land

To effectively navigate and successfully cross No Brand's Land, marketers need to start by adapting brand message creation and delivery to today's strategic sales processes. Two trends in particular will drive marketers' efforts to create brand-supporting content that helps sales people sell.

Trend #1: Value Selling

For more than a decade, sales training and methodology experts have focused on improving the consultative selling skills of sales people—especially in those complex B2B selling environments. The concept is simple: first, sales people identify the needs of customers; then, they clearly demonstrate the ability of a solution to successfully respond to that customer's specific needs.

Often called Value Selling or Solution Selling, this dynamic and interactive sales process replaces previously static, one-way techniques that debated the merits of competing features and functions.

While sales people move toward creating a much more customized sales experience for each prospect, most marketing departments continued to deliver generic messaging using static collateral tools—a one-size-fits-all approach for a one-to-one world. No wonder sales people are forced to scramble to create their own custom content, piecemealed from various sources, in order to demonstrate they have listened to the customer.

The first thing brand marketers can do to help out is translate their high-level positioning into street-ready value propositions and solution-messaging that speak to customers the way sales people have been trained to sell:

* Create customer empathy by identifying and demonstrating a true understanding of the key do-or-die issues facing your customers. Do that for each level of the decision-making team, and link it back to how they do their jobs today.

* Next, determine and articulate the risks if they do not address these issues. Also, firmly establish and highlight the rewards if they do take action. Take special care to find out how your customer will define success—determine what they want to brag about if they are successful in achieving positive results.

* Then demonstrate how your company's solution helps them respond specifically—and successfully—to their key do-or-die issues. According to sales research, the top reason people buy from one company over another is because “they understand my needs.” The more relevant your solution appears to a prospect's unique needs, the better.

Trend #2: Dynamic, Personalized Collateral Building

Value selling has raised the bar, changing customer expectations about sales experiences forever. Customers have come to expect that company interactions will be personal and relevant, and tailored to their specific needs.

Meanwhile, marketing departments have tried to keep pace by adopting segmentation strategies, doing their best to tailor messages and create more customer-relevant positioning. However, the tools to deliver these increasingly sophisticated messages through the sales channels have lagged. So, we've seen a proliferation of static collateral tools designed to fit every occasion.

Unfortunately, sales people are neither warehouse managers nor librarians, and they have a hard time tracking and finding the right materials when they need them. In response, marketers have set up sales intranets to supply 24x7 access to support materials.

While these intranets improve accessibility to materials, they don't resolve the biggest issue facing today's value-selling sales people: the need to provide prospects with dynamic, personalized sales communications. With only static documentation at their disposal, sales people begin creating unique, customized documents for each sales situation.

Typically, this happens at the expense of the brand and the company. The lack of consistency between headquarters and field messages—and from sales person to sales person—undermines the millions spent on brand awareness advertising. The extra time spent by sales people to craft these personalized proposals, presentations and collateral pieces keeps them from time better spent with customers.

To truly provide relevant sales support that continues to reinforce corporate brand positioning objectives, marketers should look to implement one of several emerging solutions that enable sales people to automatically compose personal, relevant communications tools based on specific customer business requirements for each sales opportunity.

Marketing's big win is that every sales person, even within a multi-channel environment, will now be communicating a consistent company message. Imagine the brand-building power unleashed when hundreds or thousands of field sales reps begin delivering a persuasive, powerful and pre-approved message at every point of customer contact.