

A green street sign with white lettering that reads "MADISON AV". The sign is slightly tilted and has a white border.

Madison Avenue Meets Main Street

The most successful distributors don't just provide products, they generate ideas. Read on to learn five keys to giving your distributor firm an ad-agency feel.



By Dave Vagnoni

*i*n the tiny town of Fairmont, MN – population 12,000 – AdMfg Inc. (*asi/105165*) plays big. The distributor, founded only two years ago, markets itself as a full-service agency capable of developing campaigns, creating websites, building displays, designing logos and printing brochures. And while ad specialties certainly aren't an afterthought here, they're not always the first thought, either.

“We’re great at cross-selling,” says Ruth Theobald, AdMfg’s president. “If we only sold promotional products, we might as well just close our doors.”

As her company’s name suggests, Theobald’s strategy is to manufacture advertising. Yet there’s no one mold she uses to win business. There’s no magic potion pitched to clients. Instead, with an assist from technology, a bit of guerilla marketing and some uncommon flair, AdMfg has established a reputation for being curiously different. And that’s a good thing. “Even though we’re in rural Minnesota, we have competition here in our industry,” Theobald says. “We use Skype to talk to clients. We give away a lot of stuff. We have The Dude.”

Yes, The Dude. Rallying its community and advancing its brand, AdMfg has introduced a flexible, stick-figure-shaped mascot known for its pointed catch phrase: Dude the Right Thing. “We were in a creative session and we wanted something that could throw or kick around our company’s round logo, so we came up with The Dude,” Theobald says. “We want to be good giver-backers.”

And, so far, AdMfg has been better than good. First, in 2009, the firm planned the Dude Roll-in, Ride & Rally as a fundraiser for veterans. Then, on September 11 of last year, AdMfg promoted the first-ever Dude Salute, which included a parade, stage music, food, a silent auction and a helicopter flyover. The inaugural “Dude” events have generated considerable attention and business for AdMfg, while also raising \$20,000 for veterans. “I come from a military family,” Theobald says. “My heart is in that.”

With plenty of heart and through lots of hard work, Theobald’s company has become a leading example of a new-age distributor. Gone are the days of pushing products. Now, for the most successful firms, it’s all about delivering ideas. “The biggest thing is relationships,” Theobald says.

Borrowing from the ad-agency model, *Counselor* offers five ways to help distributors transition into a full-service operation, branding solutions rather than branding items.

Be Consultative

Atlanta-based consultant Paul Johnson would rather ad specialties salespeople talk less and inquire more. “Sometimes we try to impress people with our knowledge of the industry,” says Johnson, the founder of ConsultativeSelling.com. “Instead, you need to ask smart questions.”

“You need to do a lot of research prior to making a contact. Don’t introduce products. Go in with ideas.”

JAMIE ISABEL,
DALMATIAN CREATIVE AGENCY
(ASI/174486)

In line with a creative agency approach, Johnson suggests salespeople develop a list of roughly 20 questions that focus on a business outcome. “You need to figure out what’s important to a buyer,” he says. “Think of yourself like a doctor who wants to diagnose a patient with the fewest number of tests. If you can determine what’s bothering a client, you can look smart.”

That list of questions, Johnson believes, should evoke emotion when clients answer. For example, a seasoned consultative salesperson persuades potential customers to think about the expensive consequences of a wrong decision, like a slogan that sends

an offensive message. “You can be really successful as a consultative seller if there’s risk of failure for a client,” he says. “You want to be the one to mitigate that risk by helping the buyer wade through options.”

Jamie Isabel, president of Dalmatian Creative Agency (*asi/174486*), often applies Johnson’s inquisitive logic. “I don’t want to peddle products,” he says. “I want to be a professional consultant.”

The self-proclaimed Idea Man, Isabel has designed campaigns ranging from an eat-healthy garden promotion involving 1,200 green T-shirts to a massive employee-rewards program for a fast-food chain with 700,000 workers in 8,000 franchise stores. In each case, though, Isabel brought customer concepts at the start and ad specialties at the end. “You need to do a lot of research prior to making a contact,” he says. “Don’t introduce products. Go in with ideas.”

A similar consultative strategy is used by Bruce Korn, owner of Zakback Inc. (*asi/365556*). Korn recently helped a high-school marching band raise enough money to travel cross-country and participate in the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, CA.

“We sold products at various events like football games and open houses,” Korn says. “We asked how they wanted the products sold and distributed. It’s always important to find out from a customer who the audience is, what they want to accomplish, whether they’re looking for a wow factor and what exposure they want. You have to get to the end game.”

Be Imaginative

It’s likely that Calgary-based distributor Metromedia Marketing, a BrandAlliance company (*asi/268940*), has more CEOs than any other firm in the entire industry. That’s because its service staff isn’t made up of reps. Instead, it’s made up of Customer Exhilaration Officers, or CEOs. “People

will call and talk to two people and wonder why we have more than one CEO,” says Sandra Matthews, the company’s Manager of Soup To Nuts. “It’s a conversation piece.”

But it’s only one of many pieces in Metromedia’s positive-energy marketing plan. For example, at the front of the firm’s office is a large board that encourages employees and visitors to explain why today is a great day. “People will write about when they got married or about a new program being launched,” Matthews says. “Customers really enjoy it and it’s good for morale. Throughout the day, people go back to the board to see the latest updates.”

Of course, engaging customers creatively can be accomplished in the boardroom, as well. When Nike was planning its 22-city human race, the sportswear giant wanted a memorable item to hand out to runners as they crossed the finish line. Seattle-based Catalyst Marketing (*asi/195067*) developed the winning idea. “They weren’t looking for trophies,” says Tom Havens, Catalyst’s president. “They wanted something useful, so we developed a sustainable bracelet made from recycled materials.”

To stay within the race theme, Catalyst packaged the bracelets in red tubes that look similar to batons. The individual race winners received 24k gold bracelets placed in brass tubes. “We always want to create the message and not be reactive,” Havens says. “We want to be involved in the beginning stages of a campaign, not at the end.”

That’s exactly what happened in another one of Catalyst’s most successful projects. From scratch, the distributor created an entire turnkey program for a large wireless company, building a website, maintaining a company store and supplying grand-opening toolkits for managers of individual shops. “We provided merchandise to hand out, referral cards and even metrics on the back end,” said Havens. “We compared a survey with store goals vs. generation.”

“Boomers like e-mail. With people 32 or 33, it’s almost 100% texting.”

MIKE MUETZEL, MX MARKETING,
MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

Havens believes smart distributors have an advantage over ad agencies, one that he enjoys exploiting. “There’s a gap in the marketplace because creative agencies have no idea about merchandise,” he says. “They think it’s beneath them.”

While Catalyst Marketing is ready to fill in that gap, so is The Sunshine Group (*asi/339525*). Damien Wiesenfeld, the Florida firm’s president, likes coupling style with substance. “You don’t treat kids the same, so you shouldn’t treat clients the same either,” he says.

When an accounting company wanted to bring a little pizzazz to a membership drive, Wiesenfeld quickly had an idea come to mind. “The drive was in March so we themed it around March Madness,” he begins. “We put together an imprinted box and inside there was a chip that had the sound of fans roaring, a foam finger, pom poms, a pennant, noise sticks, a few eye blacks and a custom letter from the client.”

While the promotion certainly showed off creativity, it demonstrated great value, as well. “Ad specialties are the most effective medium there is,” Wiesenfeld says. “It’s important to educate people. When they understand the value we add, they become better clients.”

Be Trendy

Before he started his own distributor firm, Rich De Clemente was the president of an ad agency for 10 years. When you consider

all the services his current company offers, his background becomes apparent. “We do radio, TV, direct mail, full-color brochures and websites,” says De Clemente, director of sales for De Clemente Media & Promotions (*asi/331018*). “My portfolio is a real added bonus.”

Often, De Clemente finds himself providing both products and creative services to customers, following a trend of client demand. Many decision-makers want a one-stop, agency-like experience and De Clemente is happy to oblige. “I have a local Holiday Inn Express as a good client,” he says. “It all started over a glass of wine at a holiday party. They were unhappy with the company doing work for them. Now we provide them with promotional products and brochures.”

Of course, winning business, whether over a drink or over the phone, is a big enough challenge nowadays. Keeping clients requires separate talents and dedication. De Clemente prefers to stay closely involved with each aspect of an account. “For the brochures, it involves shooting interiors, copywriting and design,” he says. “I do all the creative stuff myself.”

While not every distributor has the skill set that De Clemente does, there are several ways they can stay current with the latest buying trends and client behavior. Consultant and speaker Mike Muetzel believes education is a critical component to success. “You need to be more than just a commodity supplier,” he says. “Go to the websites of your clients. Sign up for their newsletter. Join any trade associations they belong to.”

ONLINE EXTRAS

Want more tips on how to turn your distributor company into a full-service marketing agency? Head now to www.CounselorMag.com for expanded content from this article.

Muetzel also thinks the Internet, as popular as it is, has untapped potential as a selling tool. He suggests distributors promote themselves as experts by writing short articles and publishing them online. “There are some great sites out there, like www.ezinearticles.com, that allow you to submit and get published,” says Muetzel, founder of Mx Marketing, Management Solutions. “Submit articles that are easier to find. Come up with three tips to consider on a product launch or three things to avoid when supplying a gift bag for a conference.”

Besides setting education and publication goals, Muetzel also recommends that distributor reps change their pop-in mindset. “When salespeople are traveling to see a client, they’ll stop in to see other clients nearby,” he begins. “What they’re really saying is, ‘My time is worthless, I thought I’d waste some of yours.’ Consultants are researchers. You need to bring solutions.”

Muetzel tells salespeople to keep a folder of articles for all the industries they call on. Then, during a visit, he suggests leaving pertinent materials with a client. “Write on or highlight things on the pages, maybe use arrows,” he says. “People tend to keep things that are marked up. You’re being another set of eyes for your client.”

Finally, Muetzel, who’s written extensively on generational buying, recommends salespeople communicate like their clients do. “Boomers like e-mail,” he says. “With people 32 or 33, it’s almost 100% texting.”

Be Social

At Pinnacle Promotions (asi/295986), an entire seven-member department is devoted to search marketing. “We have content writers, we do video, 360-degree photography and social media,” says Mitch Weintraub, Pinnacle’s CEO. “We’ve been successful with this internally and we’re beginning to offer these services to clients, as well.”

It’s a Mad World...

In AMC’s award-winning show *Mad Men*, the curtain is pulled back on the freewheeling, go-go days of a Madison Avenue ad agency in the 1960s. And while there are some things we certainly wouldn’t suggest emulating (the four-martini lunches, rampant office dalliances and copious amounts of cigarette smoking, for example), there are some effective management and marketing tips you can glean from the slick hipsters at Sterling Cooper Draper Price:



- **Diversify your client list.** When SCDP lost the Lucky Strike account – which comprised 80% of its billing – the company was poised for disaster. What saved the day? Not Roger Sterling, one of the agency’s principals who took the account for granted and let it fall by the wayside, but some of the junior staffers who stepped up with new accounts that were admittedly smaller and not as sexy, but much more stable.

- **Avoid the super-star syndrome.** *Mad* man Don Draper, the suave, handsome creative director, is widely viewed as a one-man arsenal of talents – imaginative, ingenuous, a great presenter and a rainmaker who knows how to seal a deal. But when Draper’s personal life implodes, his work suffers, much to the chagrin of his colleagues (and the ad agency) who rely on him to shoulder so much responsibility. By delegating roles and playing to people’s strengths, your bench becomes much deeper and richer, and it won’t be catastrophic if any one person falters.

- **Inspiration is everywhere.** In one poignant scene, the often stone-faced stoic lead, Don Draper, pulls a rabbit out of a hat when his creative team is struggling to name Kodak’s new home-movie device. Don’s epiphany lies in tapping into the deep emotion that family brings, as he equates home movies to memories of being with his kids and snapshots of them taken at the beach – and on a certain amusement-park ride. Hence, the creation of the famed Kodak “carousel” slide holder for its projector and a huge coup for Sterling Cooper.

- **Size doesn’t matter.** When the *Mad Men* ad agency was “Sterling Cooper” during the first three seasons, it was a force to be reckoned with; when an acquisition went awry and the names on the door fled, taking their top talent with them, they opened a new entity, “Sterling Cooper Draper Price.” What this incarnation lacks in size and sales, it makes up for in resourcefulness, nimbleness and *chutzpah*. They may be small, but by billing themselves as the upstart, boutique agency (and not skimping on stylish office space and accessories) the owners position themselves as the cool kids everyone wants to hang with in the marketplace. – MB

Initially, the goal at Pinnacle was to market its own brand. The company signed up for a YouTube channel, started blogging, developed a Facebook page and embraced Twitter. “We made a big push last year to do a lot of videos,” Weintraub says. “We’re constantly Tweeting, launching new programs and offering ways to use promotional products. Content is king. We’re always tracking and using analytics.”

Recently, Pinnacle’s search-marketing efforts have expanded to not just find customers, but help them. “We’re working with a medical practice to rebrand their logo and letterhead, basically putting together a new identity package for them,” Weintraub says. “We’re also helping them with search engine optimization (SEO) so they can rank higher.”

Offering SEO services might seem daunting at first for a small distributor, but taking Pinnacle’s approach might make it easier. Simply put, before you can become an SEO expert, you need to strengthen your own company’s social network and then track the exposure of your brand. “The incredible thing about the social Web is it enables a small business to appear like a huge operation,” says social networking expert Mirna Bard. “You can be operating your business from the back of your truck or garage, and with strong online presence, no one would know the difference.”

Bard believes monitoring tools are key to establishing social media success. She recommends several free online tracking devices, including Backtype, Bit.ly, Google Alerts and Xinu. “By using keywords and phrases, a salesperson can effectively generate leads by listening to conversations about the products or services people are asking their peers about,” Bard says.

Be Different

Unconcerned about learning curves and terminology, Jeff Hall tends to hire salespeople without industry experience. “We

have a different mindset than most,” he says about his company’s staff. “We have salespeople from the pharma industry, we have a nuclear engineer, an event planner and brand managers. We’re very selective. We hire by committee.”

Hall, the president of Virginia-based NewClients (*asi/282470*), manages one of the most tech-savvy distributor staffs in the country. Besides offering sourcing, fulfillment and print-on-demand services, the company provides its own proprietary software to clients. “Having a tech team in-house like we do is unusual,” Hall says. “We do all the coding. We have constantly changing software. It’s totally responsive to clients’ needs.”

The software, called PowerIt, allows clients to set up online company stores, which are then managed from selection to inventory control to reporting by NewClients. The software is provided to customers at no extra charge. “It’s the cost of doing business,” Hall says.

Along with providing your clients with the latest in technology, you might consider offering another service that many feel is just as important: public relations. That’s the strategy of King of Prussia, PA-based distributor Jack Horner Communications (JHC) (*asi/226818*). “We have a diverse client roster, from health care to banking to technology companies,” says Jack Horner, president of JHC. “We’ve been in business for 19 years and I’d say for the last 10 we’ve offered promotional products. Our PR clients become our promotional products clients.”

Rather than shying away from promotional products, Horner actually finds his clients enjoy the creative injection ad specialties allow. “We deal with a lot of law firms and accounting firms and they feel they’re not able to do creative marketing,” Horner says. “For them, a clever promotional product is very exciting.” ○

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