



By Richard D. Czerniawski

LET'S NOT IGNORE EXECUTION

There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.
Ancient Proverb

I must admit that I scoff at management declarations that they are going to win in the marketplace through "superior execution." Even achieving an execution consistent with the strategy is a challenge for most organizations and, when realized, is mediocre at best. There's an awful lot of slippage between strategy and execution as there can be 'twixt the cup and the lip. Moreover, there are wide variations in the quality of execution performance.

Mike Tyson famously declared, "Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth." I say, "Everyone has great execution until they fail in the market to achieve their goals." By the way, I'm assuming they have an appropriate strategy—that's quite an assumption since strategies are often flawed. However, I want to focus on execution in this musing about marketing.

Why am I musing about execution? Just yesterday, I saw positioning concepts that had been prepared by the client for marketing research. These concepts were translated from a successful workshop on developing alternate positioning strategies for a new pharmaceutical product. Unfortunately, they did not capture the brand idea for each. In other words, the execution was incorrect and, consequently, it's back to the drawing board for the client. The "drawing board" is not about strategy, but faithfully executing each brand idea in concept form for target customers.

Why is it so challenging to achieve execution consistent with the strategy, no less superior execution? I believe there are many factors among which are:

- **Too many people involved in implementation.** The more people involved, the more opportunity for slip-ups.
- **Need for consensus.** This exacerbates the problem of working with too many people. The fault is that managers work to satisfy each other rather than remain faithful to the strategy.
- **Focus on words rather than the idea.** Words are important. However, they must express the strategy, not personal preferences.

- **Poor communication.** This is particularly problematic when more than one functional area is involved in execution such as client - agency, marketing - sales, marketing - R&D, marketing - marketing research—on and on, ad nauseam.
- **Limiting time for execution.** This factor is common in advertising development. Marketers take significantly more time for strategy development than set aside for it, leaving limited time for creative development. The creative team needs time to work through multiple ideas, learn from each, and throw out the bad ones.
- **Absence of or poor stewardship.** We can't assume that others will pick-up and execute our marketing plans and strategies. Stewardship requires that we marketers understand and accept this role. Additionally, it requires that we not only communicate clearly and frequently but develop milestones, follow-up often to ascertain progress against those milestones, and provide direction in the form of coaching (i.e., identify what you need to see to make the work more productive).
- **Not striving for excellence in all things.** Here's a maxim worth taking to heart: *As we do anything, we do everything.* We need to demand excellence from ourselves, others, and in everything we undertake. No exceptions.

There are undoubtedly other factors to consider, such as blind versus true obedience to senior management input, failure to objectively assess performance and identify causal factors needed to learn and improve, playing the blame game, etc.

Let's not ignore execution. Let's give it the attention and focus it deserves and manage it as responsible stewards of our brands.

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