

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CONTINGENCY PLANNING?

(Note: We're reissuing this DISPATCHES article now consciously. While our content is not a direct analogy, we think the perspective and principles herein apply--to some degree anyway--to our current Covid-19 dilemma/enemy/competitor. Among the many arguments--yes, and finger-pointing accusations--we hear, is that our country struggles so greatly now with the pandemic in great part because we had no serious contingency plan in place...for this or any other pandemic. It's doubtful that very many countries had one either, though a few in Asia that had previously faced SARS and H1N1 type epidemics at least had a somewhat effective, recent-past roadmap to implement.

We note, first and foremost, in this DISPATCHES that, while genuine contingency planning is above all *strategic*, all too often marketing contingency planning remains merely *tactical*. One could argue--some political factions DO argue-- that here in the U.S., that's in fact our single biggest "miss": we have no national *strategy* against this most daunting of enemies. Many might agree with this; many might not. But, if we're intellectually honest with each other, while we have the tactics of social distancing, mask covering, and frequent hand disinfecting, neither the entire U.S nor any of its parts (States, Counties, Cities) has much "strategic" beyond these tactics.

So what are we suggesting? Only something as simple as this: if you need any further motivation to consistently invest time in contingency planning for your marketing, for your brand, we have in front of us a most vivid and painful example of why making such an investment is so very, very important. Unlike with our current lack of a contingency plan for Covid-19, we brand-builders are not facing significant loss of life. But, then, who knows? Maybe having a solid contingency plan might end up, one day, saving--or at least extending--your brand's life.)

"To...not prepare is the greatest of crimes; to be prepared beforehand for any contingency is the greatest of virtues." (Sun Tzu)

"One thing that makes it possible to be an optimist is if you have a contingency plan for when all hell breaks lose." (Randy Pausch)

As we are both former military pilots (Navy and Air Force), the disciplines ingrained in us during our intense training and many, subsequent flight missions have never waned. In fact, we have continued to apply a good many of those disciplines throughout our corporate

and consulting careers. One of the most prominent of these is that absolutely essential thinking we repeated prior to every single mission: “*Plan for success but prepare for failure.*” Understand: proud and aggressive young aviators almost never fail; they abhor the very thought of a personal failure, often considering it an impossibility. But an airplane can unpredictably fail. The weather can unpredictably fail. Radios and electronics, even their overseeing air traffic controllers, can also fail. At times like these, there is nothing sweeter than knowing *exactly* what you are going do to save the mission...and perhaps yourself.

When it comes to marketing—especially at the time of a new product launch or at the implementation of a new marketing plan for an established product—things can also fail...as in fail to go the way we have planned. That’s why, just as pilots do before every mission, it’s essential that brand-builders prepare for the unexpected. In our earliest days as marketers, we were trained to expect the unexpected. That meant that not only did we create an annual marketing plan for our own brand as well as *infer* one for our key competitor; we also created a *contingency plan* for every new product or line extension launch. The idea, of course, was to have alternative strategies in place as a way of preparing for the unexpected. But, as sound and sensible a practice contingency planning remains, we almost never encounter it in our work with marketers and their senior managers. It’s a real mind-boggler: whatever happened to marketing contingency planning?

We have a few theories in answer to this question:

- 1. Genuine contingency planning is inherently strategic; but so much of today’s marketing is inherently tactical.** The reason that contingency planning is strategic is simple: it demands thinking competitively. Not merely thinking how to out-manuever one’s competition, but importantly, thinking *how a competitor might out-manuever us*. Or, even more to the point, how a key competitor might “spoil” our new product launch...or force us to invest resources originally planned for that launch against something entirely less important to us. And when we assert that so much of today’s marketing planning is fundamentally tactical, one need look no further than the pervasive “hole” that gapes out from marketing plan to marketing plan: absolutely no ROI linkage between a bevy of individual initiatives and the ultimate volume, profit, and share business objectives these initiatives ought to “add up to.”
- 2. Corporate thinking disdains the notion of failure—of any kind.** The “f-bomb” that offends senior managements the most isn’t the one we hear in movies; it’s the “failure word,” and the stigma of weakness that comes with it. Honestly, how often have you ever heard a senior manager even hint at possible failure by asking, “What, if any, are the weak links in your plan? What might competition do to stymie our launch, our plan? And, what will be out counter should something like this occur?” Actually, such questions should be routine. They aren’t really about *failure*. Failure denotes a disaster; it implies that “all is lost.” But having a launch or annual marketing plan meet complete and utter failure is almost unheard of. What **is** often heard of is encountering an unexpected competitive roadblock—

such as a last-minute contractual change with a key account that denies our new product all the access it originally expected. So, contingency planning isn't truly about avoiding failure; rather, it's more typically about being *prepared* to counter unforeseen obstacles.

- 3. Generally speaking, there is a prevalent, internal “smugness” of thinking when it comes to the competition: i.e., they really aren't all that smart.** It's a funny thing, but one that we have observed in virtually every one of our client engagements over these past 35 years...namely, even across so many categories where products perform equally to one another, marketers perceive their product as, at the very least, a somewhat better performer. You might say, “Well of course! It's only natural that marketers *believe* in their product. It's essential if they're going to throw their hearts and minds into building that product into a prodigious brand.” Sure, believing in one's product-brand is essential; but so is a having a healthy respect for one's competition...particularly competition that has already demonstrated, through enviable share levels and longevity, a record for success. Without this healthy respect, putting oneself in the shoes of the competitor's brand manager and contriving ways to derail our brand isn't going to happen. (Who needs a contingency plan anyway when our competitors aren't all that smart?)

We think it's high time to make marketing contingency planning a requirement again. And if “Plan for success but prepare for failure” is too off-putting an expression for today's corporate leaders, then let's amend it a bit: “Plan for success but prepare for the unexpected.” Such a practice certainly goes a lot further toward achieving the success we all seek for our brands than the one (apparently) in vogue: “Hope for success.” And, after all, as any experienced marketer and brand-builder knows, hope is definitely not a marketing plan.

Check out Chapter 10—Overstating Your Capabilities and Underestimating the Competition—in Richard's new book to learn more on contingency planning: <http://bdn-intl.com/avoiding-critical-marketing-errors>

Stay safe and be well,
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