

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

MEGA-MISTAKES MARKETING THE MASK

“Masks are the best vaccine we have right now.”

It was late February, in Bangkok, news of the creeping Corona Virus beginning to buzz around the city. In high-people-traffic places, like the BTS Skytrain stations and platforms, the government was already handing out free masks to passers-by. Along the crowded main street sidewalks, however, perhaps no more than 10% of Thai's were themselves wearing masks. This in a country, not quite as virus disciplined as a South Korea or Hong Kong, but nevertheless generally amenable to “doing what the government asks/requires” of its citizens. Among Thai friends, out and about as usual, we ask ourselves, “Should we go ahead and wear one?” But no. Because we've all heard on TV and read on-line that masks don't really protect us from infection. They *might*--if they meet high medical standards--stop us from infecting someone else. But really, they only affect your perception: they make you feel a little less anxious about things.

Fast forward to mid-July. Out for a weekend driving-getaway to small town America...Corsicana, Texas to be precise. Now cloth-masked, hungry for lunch, we enter a well-known café in the center of the town's historic district. No longer are we at all in doubt about what mask-wearing (not just N-95's but even the homemade cloth ones) can do, protecting us as well as others. Entering the café, the hostess is unmasked; looking toward the kitchen, the staff is unmasked; nearly every table is taken, nor is any single table socially distanced to any extent. Hungry though we are, we quickly U-turn out to find a place where, at least, masks are widely in use.

Aside from all the political and social media guff that has conspired to debunk mask-wearing, one other conclusion is obvious: *marketing of the mask has failed*. Okay, masks per se are not a Brand. But that doesn't make them any less in need of sound marketing to deliver widespread use. Forest fire prevention, seat belt use, and second-hand smoke elimination similarly required sound marketing; they got it and it worked. Sad to say, the marketing of mask-wearing has not only failed, but the failures are of the most fundamental and egregious kind. Such as...

1. **Zero Reliable Product Performance Research/Data--** Though not a brand, the mask *is* a performance product. Like, for example, Clorox Disinfecting Wipes, consumer uptake and on-going usage depend upon a credible product performance

claim (such as, for Clorox Wipes, “Kills 99.9% of Viruses & Bacteria”). And this claim absolutely requires test data to back it up. As we painfully recall, however, when the mask was launched--particularly here in the U.S.--there not only was no test or consumer usage data to back up performance, there was no claim. Virtually the opposite of a claim, instead something along the lines of: “Wearing the mask may not protect against Covid-19 infection, but it can’t hurt.” Of course, six months into the pandemic with country after country showing flattened to negligible infection curves, we all can see better evidence (if not hard data) that wearing the mask does offer some protection...evidence that, while better than none, is well past the “launch window.” Thankfully, though outrageously late in coming, the evidence of the mask’s performance keeps getting better. Just this past week, in Kansas, the State Health Director publicly shared data from an unintentional “test/control” mask effectiveness assessment within the state. It seems that, the Governor’s mask mandate having been overturned by the Kansas Legislature shortly after its issuance, counties were left to decide whether to issue a mask mandate or not. Some did; most didn’t. But the startling curve drop within the “test set” of counties that *did* issue a mask mandate versus the un-flattened, keeps-on-going infection rate of those that didn’t makes a strong case for an equally strong (inferred) mask-wearing “product claim.”

2. **A Non-Existent Benefit Ladder**--If you’re one of our longtime DISPATCHES readers or one of our many clients, you know how strongly we believe in and adhere to the critical necessity of crafting and implementing a benefit-ladder-linkage for every brand and product. This ladder includes: What the product does--Product Benefit; What’s in it for me--Consumer Benefit; How that makes me feel--Emotional Benefit. Without any performance data or claim, quite evidently there is little chance of crafting any meaningful or convincing “what the product does” or “what’s in it for me” promises for mask-wearing. But even without these, there has always been the opportunity to create a sensitive but sensible “*how wearing the mask makes me feel*” benefit-promise. Making such a benefit productive, though, would also have demanded thoughtful segmentation of the “U.S. Citizen Market.” It’s unlikely that a single emotional promise would hit the decision-making nerve of all 330 million Americans. But if directed at the segments of Americans most likely to respond (influencers and non-influencers alike), there would be a high likelihood of success. Think about WWII, when eligible-aged young men and women--as well as their parents--were exhorted to *feel patriotic American* as evidenced best by the ubiquitous posters of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at you and saying, “I want YOU for U.S. Army.” A feeling, by the way, that even the non-targeted could appreciate.
3. **No Campaign/Idea**--Of course, with no benefit ladder there has been no ensuing communication campaign. Nothing even as simple as “I Want YOU” posters. With no meaningful or moving benefit-promise, no wonder there is the wide-spread disjointed or rejected desired behavior of mask-wearing. Think about it. All the other social health “products” that worked **did** have compelling, highly memorable communication campaigns resulting in desired behaviors: Smokey the Bear’s

“Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires”; Seat-belts’ “Buckle Up For Safety” (initially) and “Click It or Ticket” and “Saved By the Buckle” (more recently); and Anti-Secondhand Smoking’s “Truth” effort. Where’s our “The Mask Is the Best Vaccine We Have Until We Get One”?

It really is a shame that so many of us earthlings, not just those of us living in the United States, have suffered from the complete lack of mask marketing...especially when every other product, service, or socially important behavior on the planet has been so well marketed. How to explain this? It’s definitely complicated, not the least by those political implications among many that mask-wearing is either unmanly or some kind of conspiracy hoax. But maybe there’s a more basic explanation: there’s never been, not is there now, an accountable Mask Brand Manager!

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Stay safe and be well,
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