

The Power of Dumb Ideas

by Randall Rothenberg

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This will be the dumbest riff on marketing you will ever read. If you're lucky.

Marketing is overwhelmed by complexity, and marketers' predisposition toward creativity only complicates their job, their companies' operations, and their own lives even more.

Ten years ago, the challenges were *merely*:

- the advance of the five-hundred-channel universe
- reconciling the historic tensions between marketing and sales
- calculating the return on advertising investment
- keeping abreast of fickle public taste

Today, a quick look at Google indicates that we're grappling with an eight-billion-channel world. The distinction between marketing and sales has evaporated in the face of direct-marketing technologies that brand products, take orders, and fulfill them at the same time.

Even worse, there is no more public taste. There are only publics' tastes, which are ever more atomized, specific, and hard to fathom.

David Ogilvy's contention that "it takes a big idea to attract the attention of consumers and get them to buy your product" no longer applies. His fellow advertising guru Bill Bernbach's belief that, in marketing, "not to be different is virtually suicidal" today may be suicidal in and of itself.

The solution to marketing's current ills is not more creativity. It's less.

Novelty for the sake of novelty is not only risky, it's more often than not a recipe for irrelevance. A study of 1,300 publicly traded U.S. companies in fifty-five industries by Chuck Lucier, senior vice president emeritus at Booz Allen Hamilton, found that only four broad ideas, copied over and over again in one sector after another, accounted for 80 percent of the breakout businesses created between 1965 and 1995:

power retailing, megabrands, focus/simplify/standardize, and the value chain bypass. True, the big-box store may not be the most original concept on Earth — which is exactly the point! Originality hasn't mattered a whit to the customers, employees, and shareholders who have enjoyed its application in consumer electronics (Circuit City), home improvement (Home Depot), and office supplies (Staples).

So what is the simple, dumb truth?

Imitation Across Industries Is More Efficient and Effective Than Blue-Sky Creativity and Innovation. If you accept that one million monkeys pounding on keyboards for one thousand years will eventually, accidentally produce a ton of gibberish and one Shakespearean sonnet, you must also accept the converse: that a lone creative individual racking her brain will produce much less gibberish, and nothing profound. Appropriating existing marketing

concepts is cheaper — and certainly quicker to implement — than developing new ones. The secret is bringing a great idea from another market or industry to your market or industry.

The Energy Isn't in the Idea; it's in the Execution. Every manager, from the middle on up, knows that the secret to success lies not in strategy, but in galvanizing a team to implement the strategy. Lucier's research on breakout businesses also showed that the winning companies in each market were those that put together a winning business system around the unoriginal ideas. The hard work of marketing lies not in developing a groundbreaking product or the communications scheme for it, but in coordinating the efforts of R&D, manufacturing, finance, communications, sales, or some set of subunits. Do this once, and you've created a cross-functional team that knows how to do it over and over again, and whose enthusiasm itself communicates volumes.

You Must Create True Believers Before You Can Win New Converts. I once asked the president of a major U.S. auto company whether any studies had been done to determine which factors distinguished superior salespeople from average salespeople. He responded that the only research he'd ever seen found no differences in age, education, sex, race, or family background, but did reveal one distinct variable: the number of times the individual went back and attempted to close the sale. Faith in yourself and in your colleagues is a necessary predisposition for marketers; the best ones convey that faith outward, eventually subsuming their customers and clients. The most powerful market-

ing ideas create and reinforce that kind of faith.

It's Your Context That Counts. The big idea doesn't have to be the brand-new idea. Something common to the word at large may be very new to you and your organization. This is more than enough to galvanize the team, create faith, and build the world's greatest marketing department. +

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Resources

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Leslie H. Moeller, Sharat K. Mathur, and Randall Rothenberg, "The Better Half: The Artful Science of ROI Marketing," *s+b*, Spring 2003; www.strategy-business.com/article/8235

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