

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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Why Ask Why: Finding the Real Value in Communications

We've probably all rolled our eyes (literally or figuratively) when presenting a detailed results report after a campaign and hearing, "Gee. This is nice, but what did this really *do* for us?"

Volumes have been written in public relations literature and trade media about the need to more effectively demonstrate the value our profession provides to the corporations, associations and other entities we represent. PR people inherently believe that good press helps lead to strong relationships which benefit the organization. But, are the key decision makers in the C-suite able to adequately associate "corporate reputation" and "brand value" to the bottom-line, financial performance that dictates their future?

Developing effective communications, and continually demonstrating the value it delivers, are based on an unwavering commitment to organizational objectives *and* strategies that tie each tactic to a specific desired outcome from the audience.

Eyes on the Prize

What business outcome or "prize" matters most? Good customer relationships.

Customers want to do business with brands they trust, and PR enables and facilitates this dialogue with efficiency and impact. Nurturing relationships by transparently sharing meaningful content based on mutual interests is what PR does best. And, smart companies that leverage great products and customer relationships with relevant communications will reap the rewards over time.

A great example is found with a product that likely has a permanent place in many of our pockets and purses – a BlackBerry wireless device. Industry watchers point to BlackBerry maker Research In Motion's commitment to a long-term brand strategy as one driver of its success, as illustrated by

its debut on *BusinessWeek's* annual list of 100 Best Global Brands in 2008.

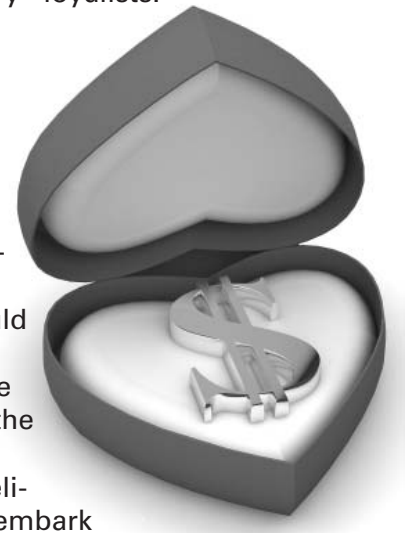
BusinessWeek says the methodology for its yearly rankings "evaluates brand value in the same way other corporate assets are valued—on the basis of how much it is likely to earn for the company in the future."

This is exactly the approach needed to help corporate leaders understand the enduring value of PR. The BlackBerry brand strategy accelerated its evolution from a B2B e-mail solutions provider to a leader in personal connectivity for professional and consumer users. In first quarter of 2009, the BlackBerry Curve topped Apple's iPhone as the best-selling consumer smartphone, according to NPD Group.

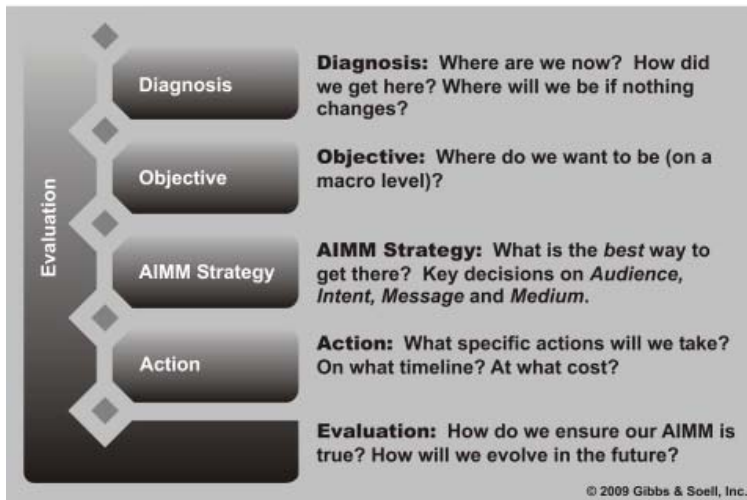
Although it generates visibility with marketing from its retailers like Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile and its own promotional efforts, BlackBerry truly earns its good reputation with unpaid recommendations from users, including professional product reviewers, President Barack Obama and a legion of self-proclaimed "CrackBerry" loyalists.

Customer Nirvana

The road to customer relationship nirvana is a long one. Along the way, the strategic dialogue between professional communicators and C-suites should progress in a natural cycle: acknowledge the present and visualize the future, assess options and determine the likelihood of success, and embark with full confidence on the appropriate course of action.



At Gibbs & Soell, the comprehensive strategic planning process (see illustration) begins with a **Diagnosis** that takes a historical



perspective to first ask, “Where are we? How did we get here?”

The **Objective** phase takes the strategic exercise to a higher vantage point and asks, “Where do we want to be on a macro level?”

In the context of the longer-term corporate objectives, the planning model then looks at the **Strategy** to pose the question, “What is the best way to get there?”

From there, the **Strategy** discussion evolves into four strands, or “AIMM” for short, which isolate your target audience (Audience), intended actions from the audience (Intent), message drivers (Message) and appropriate media channels (Medium).

The “Intent” aspect of strategic communications is too often lost in theories of brand perception and corporate reputation. At the end of the day, all communications are intended to reach individual people and move them toward taking (or not taking) a specific action.

Brand Promoters

Goals like creating awareness and strengthening comprehension

take on new meanings when tied to strategies that equate levels of audience understanding with desired outcomes of purchase

behavior, customer loyalty, and even evangelism.

One of the most compelling aspects of modern media consumption is the importance of tracking and


managing the intricate network through which your best customers directly influence the buying habits and brand loyalty of others. Companies with products like BlackBerry that lend themselves to strong personal attachment have an advantage.

Companies that market products without such personal cachet have to work harder to understand the context of their customers and relate to them based on their broader needs, preferences – and even anxieties.

“Anything you do in your business to create more promoters – and eliminate more detractors – is good,” said Bruce Temkin, a vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research, in a presentation of his 2009 study of the customer experiences of 4,000 consumers with companies across a dozen industries. Temkin urged organizations to build strategies that put into place a framework for continual assessment of the customer experience with brands.

Finally, in the context of the **Diagnosis**, **Objectives** and **Strategy**, a detailed **Action** plan is created to manage the specific tactics, timeline, budget and other factors.

And, effective **Evaluation** runs throughout the process, helping to keep the program on track and guide future evolution and refinements.

There are no silver bullets... no easy answers... but by challenging ourselves as communicators to address WHY we do what we do, we'll be better prepared to show our C-suite leaders why they should care. 

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