

The pitfalls of do-it-yourself

MARKETING

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Taking matters into your own hands is a great strategy — in some areas. But in marketing isn't one of those. With marketing, doing it yourself can be perilous for your brand.

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— Dave Thomas, president and CEO, ThomasArts

In 1993, a two-word ad campaign became a template for wanna-be marketers everywhere. Created by the advertising agency Goodby Silverstein & Partners for the California Milk Processor Board, the "Got Milk?" slogan not only increased sales of cow's milk in the Golden State, but it also emerged as the go-to ad format for amateurs playing marketing pro.

"Got Fish?" "Got Freud?" "Got This?" "Got That?" Derivative, all.

"Differentiate or die' is a motto I've often spouted," says Dave Newbold, president and executive creative director at Richter7. "How many times have people ripped off the 'Got Milk?' slogan? Once is too many. Whenever I see such a rip-off, I first think about 'Got Milk,' not the company that has borrowed it."

In the marketing arena, imitation is not flattery; it's a cop-out, and typically the result of a non-marketer trying to play one at work. Copycatting is one example of why do-it-yourself marketing is a bad idea, but there are countless other examples. From developing a strategy to implementing a campaign through snappy text and design, marketing may seem like a game anyone can play, but savvy companies understand that you can't pretend to be a marketer any more than you can pretend to be an accountant. Done well, both disciplines require specific skills and the context that comes from experience.

And, contrary to the opinion of some budget-sensitive executives and entrepreneurs, marketing is a revenue-generating activity.

"Generally, the reason companies do their own marketing is because they're trying to save money," says Dave Thomas, president and CEO of ThomasArts. "People think they can do their own marketing because they don't understand that it's a revenue generator. When people mess around with their marketing dollars, they don't understand that they're playing with their revenue, not an expense."

Because of the state's large number of small businesses, DIY marketing is fairly commonplace in Utah. It's hard to staff writers, designers and marketing strategists in-house, outsourcing costs money and the economic slowdown makes homespun marketing even more enticing. But in an age when

it doesn't take brick and mortar to peddle a product, the intangible asset known as "brand," "identity" or "image" is best left in the hands of proven experts.

(DON'T) DEVELOP YOUR OWN MARKETING STRATEGY

Since the average executive or business owner feels tapped into the company's customers and overall strategy, it seems logical that he or she should be able to develop a viable marketing strategy. Beyond that, there are plenty of reasons why people want to play marketer: Many business leaders can vividly recall the A+ project they did in that marketing class as an undergrad or in an MBA program. Everyone is exposed to so much marketing these days, it would seem to only be a matter of cherry-picking best practices. The creative aspect means everyone wants in.

"Marketing is perceived as fun. It seems everyone wants to be involved. When ledgers, balancing and credits are brought up at a dinner party, most guests run. Fast," says Todd Wolfenbarger, president and partner at The Summit Group.

Problem is, making good marketing is like making a good movie — most people know "good" when they see it and assume they can do it, but it takes a group of highly-skilled and experienced experts to do it well. Like a bad B-movie, a half-baked marketing plan will be heavy on tactics, lack a unifying thread and will ultimately miss the mark.

"I think the mistake the DIY marketer makes when they employ this thinking is they fail to hit the 101 of marketing — who will buy my product or service, where do I find the highest concentration of those people and what do they need to know or hear about my product to prefer it over the alternatives?" says Scott Kendall, president of Studeo.

STRATEGY DON'T DIY IF:

- You don't have a legit chief marketing officer.
- You don't have an in-house marketing shop.
- You don't know the finer nuances of positioning, branding and messaging.

“DIY marketers should hire an agency to develop a strategic marketing plan. Without a sound plan, tactics will be hit or miss.”

Worried about the agency hijacking your brand and direction? Valid concern. But any professional marketing shop will employ lots of listening — not lecturing — when consulting a firm on its marketing strategy.

(DON'T) DO YOUR OWN MEDIA BUYING

If you use Gmail and Facebook, you know that both send you solicitations explaining how easy it is to create a contextual ad campaign. The temptation to play marketer is killing you, isn't it? You'd love nothing more than to have your friends say, “I saw your company's ad on Facebook,” and be able to respond, “I did that!”

User-friendly tools like Google Adwords and Facebook have democratized the ad-buying process, but in fact ad buying has never been more complicated. Traditional media — TV, radio, print and outdoor — are now joined by the sexy “new media.” Most of us have sat through this meeting: “Everyone is on Twitter and Facebook. We need to be on there!” Do you? How do you know which medium is the most efficient vehicle for your company's message?

Every medium brings certain strengths and weaknesses to the table, and the media-buying process has its own language. What's a “gross rating point”? When a TV station says it has “a 40 percent share”, what does that really mean? And there's always the temptation to buy from the most persistent ad rep. After all, the pitch sounded really good, right?

“A person without any media buying experience will typically be drawn and quartered by media reps,” says

Mike Brian, partner and interactive director at Penna Powers Brian Haynes.

“Their job is to get you to buy as

MEDIA BUYING DON'T DIY IF:

- You don't know if more people watch KSL's 10 p.m. newscast or read the Sunday Deseret News.
- You don't know what CPM, GRP, remnant and as-run logs are.
- Your only justification for buying a Facebook campaign is, “Everyone I know is on there.”

much from them as possible. Not because they are evil, it is just their job. A strategic media buy will almost never be in one medium or channel. Only an experienced media buyer will know how to chart the shark-infested waters of the media world.”

COPYWRITING DON'T DIY IF:

- You think writing text for a billboard is easy since you write proposals all the time.
- Someone in the office volunteers because he/she is working on a novel.
- You're terrified by the prospect of having your ad skewered on a late-night talk show.

(DON'T) WRITE YOUR OWN AD COPY

If practice makes perfect, then every exec and entrepreneur ought to be an expert writer after punching out so many business plans, proposals and e-mails. Why, a few in the C-suite may have even taken a crack at writing a novel — item #125 on the “bucket list.” Marketing copy tends to be short and snappy, which should mean it's a cinch compared to that 25-page whitepaper, right?

Wrong. Even some of the best long-form writers aren't programmed to write ad copy. It takes a special skill and lots of practice to capture a campaign's essence in, say, seven words on a billboard. A swing and a miss can do irreparable damage to a brand.

“I think bad writing is a terrible reflection in a company and brand. And it happens all the time,” says John Kindred, partner at Vanguard Media Group. “Typos, I believe, show laziness. And I find them often — just watch Jay Leno and Dave Letterman. They both have skits about poorly-worded ads and images. And that is just a small section of what is happening.”

One reason it's so tempting to play copywriter is the best slogans seem so intuitive and simple. Thomas notes the tagline his agency wrote for Zions Bank: “We lend, you succeed.” Simple, short, yet it resonates with skeptical consumers who are tired of hearing about banks hoarding cash. The simplicity belies the fact that countless hours of work went into crafting the message.

(DON'T) DO YOUR OWN CREATIVE WORK

When a prominent photography store closed in Salt Lake City a few years ago, the owner bemoaned the fact that digital cameras and editing software have led to “I'm a pro” complexes for armies of amateurs. Take a marginal photo, stitch it up in Photoshop and voila!

Similarly, the proliferation of desktop publishing

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software has made a designer out of everyone. But bad design is even harder to mask than bad writing. The wrong design scheme will convey the wrong message, and ineffective design will be lost as white noise.

“The design aspect of advertising is focused on generating emotional impact that will cause a desired action,” Brian says. “If it isn’t done very well, it just blends into the mass of communication noise in the market. It is a low, dull, obnoxious hum that you quickly learn to subconsciously ignore.”

Good design requires both an artistic sense and plenty of technical skill. Faking it will not only be a setback for your brand, but it ties your hands in terms of making changes. The look and feel of a campaign is supposed to be persistent so consumers learn to make immediate associations based on colors, objects and other design elements. If you have to scrap a poorly executed design, not only will your campaign lose steam, but the public will likely think your brand is lurching without direction.

“We are very emotionally sensitive animals. When we see something that is poorly executed, we know it instinctively,” Brian says. “We may not be able to explain why, but you know it’s bad.” ■

DESIGN DON'T DIY IF:

- You don't know the meaning of these terms: aspect ratio, negative space and opacity.
- Your go-to move on Photoshop is the “Filters” menu.
- You wonder why more ads don't use gradients.

