



Put Your Message in the Moment: What Can and Can't Be Said Now

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It takes a while for things to sink in, for the full ramifications of market-shifts to impact how we actually do business, what we plan to achieve, and how we communicate our intentions. Up to now, what I've heard from clients has had mostly to do with money...budgets have tightened and spending decisions have slowed. But, now, clients are realizing that today's market is reshaping not just what they spend but what they say. They are starting to look at their brand messages and ask themselves, "what do we talk about now?"

While many of the market's casualties have fallen with Goliath-size tremors - banks and hedge-funds, stock valuations and IRA balances - others are simply whispering away. This is the case with many of the standard tropes in our business vernacular: the fact is, some of the things we're used to saying just don't make sense anymore. Brands that seek to stay current and credible are vetting their message portfolio to eliminate newly outmoded assertions and establish today's talking points.

Every brand manager's goal is to make sure her brand story conveys a distinctive voice, while simultaneously acknowledging the established language of business. For example, over the past several years, we've seen a broad shift toward "solutions" and away from simple "products" and "services." Today's unprecedented market conditions require us to reconsider what our key audiences want and expect to hear. In the process, many of the messages we've taken for granted are coming in for revision - or retirement.

A case in point: "We do it all for you."

This has been a popular message over the past many years. Brands have said, don't worry, we'll take care of it. Give us your business and we'll handle the details. Brands have seen it as a point of competitive advantage to be able to make broad claims about doing-it-all for the customer. We've asked customers to sign over control to us, to purchase the proverbial black box and not worry what goes on inside of it - to simply sit back and enjoy the results.

Well, the results haven't been very good lately, and consumers have grown wary of black boxes. As well-known brands in many industries have fallen by the wayside, or simply fallen down on the job, the "we'll take care of it" message has lost resonance. Consumers are paying more attention not only to the results but to how they are achieved. They want to know what's up, what to expect, and how they can be sure. In the words popularized in the recent election, they want to "look under the hood and kick the tires." They don't just want pretty packages, they want to see what's inside.

Remember the famous line from the Wizard of Oz: “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain”? Well, we’ve all become painfully aware that many of the people who’ve been standing behind the business curtain have been even less apt than the sham magician. The majority of business people, and the brands they work for, are still hard at work and are still delivering. But, when there’s a crisis in confidence, all the apples in the barrel suffer bruises, both good and bad. In fact, to stretch the metaphor a bit further, consumers are peering into the barrel in order to determine which is which.

In this environment, a “trust us” message doesn’t work. A “join us” message does.

That’s because when the going gets tough, “tough customers” start to take things into their own hands. Consumers start to pay closer attention. They start to demand a say in decision-making. They start to say, don’t just tell me what you’ll do, let me know how you plan to do it.

There’s some precedent for this, even dating back before the crises of the past year. Chevron, for example, has run a campaign that explicitly asks “Will you join us?” as they search for ways new ways to balance energy demand with tightening supply. In other categories, the words are less explicit, but the message is the same; let’s figure this out together. Here’s what we’ve got to offer. Let us know what you think.

“Trust us” messages are only one type of message casualty, while “join us” is only one potential fresh direction. In branding as in other thoughtful endeavors, coming to the right conclusions depends on asking the right questions and being open to answers that are fully sensitive to what’s going on at the moment. Today’s moment calls for us to find ways to frame messages - and foster actions - that invite greater participation from our customers and show them the newly common courtesy of providing greater transparency about how business is done.

On an individual basis, and in the context of their own brand stories and strategies, today’s companies have got to find a way to transform “We do it all for you” into “Let’s get it done together.”