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The marketing-driven company

BY STAN SUTTER

Last week in this space I told you about the spring session of the *Marketing* Board of Editorial Advisors, and our quest to come up with a blueprint for the "ideal marketing-driven innovative company." In March TerraNova Market Strategies of Toronto's co-managing partners Liz Torlée and Louise Doucet led our Board, who collectively hail from the senior ranks of marketing, agency and other marcom-related businesses, and *Marketing* staff-24 of us in all-through a three hour "discovery workshop." This format used projective techniques and other qualitative research tactics to explore issues surrounding innovation and change in the marketing industry in Canada. It was a nutritive conversation that dug deep.

After the initial activities that looked at the state of marketing here, the elements that make the innovative marketers we admire great-and why we don't or can't emulate them-three subgroups got down to the business of designing our own dream marketing-driven companies.

As Torlée and Doucet's report, which I quoted from liberally last week and will again now, pointed out, there was a "remarkable consistency" in the thinking at all three tables. So here's our top line recipe for marketing-driven innovation:

Marketing must be at the heart of the culture.

This might well be the one essential factor that separates the great from the average. Marketing should be integral to the entire operation, not some silo separate from the main action. This has to start at the top and permeate to all levels.

Think of the marketing-driven innovators the Board identified: Apple, Starbucks, eBay, Google, Cirque du Soleil, Loblaw, RIM and Toyota. All have senior management that "gets" and is totally committed to a marketing culture, and every employee understands the need to put the customer's needs first and is empowered to be a "brand ambassador." In fact, in the discussion around Toyota, it was noted that the automaker doesn't even have a marketing department in its home Japanese market. Marketing is everyone's concern.

Marketing must be built into the product.

This, of course, is the logical extension of the first point. Products that are created at the design and development stage as "inherently market ready," as opposed to those that "have to be marketed," are clearly winning the day. Think iPod. Think Blackberry. When the engineers and new product development teams are doing their jobs with customer needs firmly in mind, you've got a marketing-driven culture.

Structure must be collaborative, integrated, fluid.

We played with shapes and symbols and came up with various org chart templates. But the key commonalities were: no silos, continuous flows of information and feedback between departments.

Exploring and identifying new opportunities requires both patience and calculated risk.

Two metaphors emerged from this exercise: planting a garden and prepping a gourmet meal. In each case you need time to think and must learn to be great at it through trial and error. And you need to make peace with the fact that sometimes even when you do everything right things still fall short of expectations.

Relationships with suppliers need to be rooted in craftsmanship and a touch of magic.

This was perhaps my favourite eye opener. We picked our ideal supplier out of an array of photos of other skilled professions: firefighters, chefs, lab technicians, symphony conductors, draftsmen, contractors and hairdressers. My table chose the latter because it's a job that involves internalizing your customers' wants and needs (not always the same thing): "listening and interpreting-taking it to the next level."

Marketing and finance must work together.

Finance has to be "enlightened and excited" about marketing, not marginalized. The CFO doesn't need to be "sold," they should "buy in."

The desired financial culture reflects the need for calculated risk.

The analogies here were to poker playing and betting at the track. Yes, skill and knowledge of the game is a huge advantage. And you can hedge your bets and diversify the portfolio. But there is still that moment you've got to go with your gut instinct and make the bet. And even the CFO has to understand this.

Leadership and front-line skills require vision, passion and motivational ability.

At last, here's where the reference I made off the top last week to Bono and Steven Spielberg as CEO-and Condoleezza Rice and Spider-Man et al as the SVP team-comes in. All of them, and several others, were presented as options to hire. The U2 front man was popular because of his image as being "creative, inspirational and motivating," and Spielberg because he too is perceived as "creative," "a perfectionist" but someone who is also grounded and "stands for everyman" (for what it's worth, at least one participant-okay, I'll out him: our Board chair, and film buff, Alan Middleton-took issue with calling Spielberg "creative;" as far as Alan is concerned Spielberg may be a brilliant stylist and a master of marshalling massive resources for a common cause, but he's creatively hollow).

Others, like Rice-who was a very polarizing option, by the way-were selected for such qualities as being "smart," "accomplished," "loyal" and "trustworthy." Spider-Man, to cite another example, was desirable for being "agile," "ethical," and having an "instinct for problem solving."

It was agreed that while having differing strengths and styles within the management group is a plus, all players need to share basic values.

"Courage" is the core ingredient for success.

Things like "accessibility," "flexibility," "passion," "patience" and "never settling" were listed as key ingredients for marketing-driven innovation. But "courage" was seen as by far the most important.

Sadly, our Board believes courage is seldom fostered by most organizations in this country.

Guess it's up to all of us to find it ourselves.

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