

The power of influence

Creating a powerful marketing campaign requires more than just a great idea and the research to back that idea. It also requires the support and “buy-in” of customers and people from across business. Using the right influencing skills can help garner this support, according to PETER ZARRIS, OPIC CEO.*

SEVERAL years ago an Australian consumer goods company decided to introduce a new fizzy drink, targeting the teenage and young adult market.

Determined to meet the needs of this very discerning group, the marketing team conducted lengthy and pains-taking research, talking to hundreds of young people between the ages of 13-25 yrs in an attempt to gain insight into what they wanted.

The verdict – something that not only tasted good but looked different. Something that was stylish, hip, a bit of status symbol and would set them apart from other consumers.

The marketing department immediately responded to the challenge and after months of hard work came up with an orange flavoured drink in a funky new bottle with a long slender neck - a total departure from the traditional shorter, stouter bottle.

The team felt it was on to a winner. Not only did the product and bottle appeal to a test group of consumers but it was very different to anything else out there.

While developing and refining the concept the marketing team worked closely with the operations team and finance. They needed these divisions to be on board in terms of production requirements and the costs associated with launching the new product.

Marketing had mentioned the new product in passing to sales but had never sought their input. They figured it wasn't necessary and they'd just hold things up.

The big day arrived. The product was to go down the line and be launched internally to sales for the first time. Expectations were high.

The new package was unveiled and instead of the standing ovation marketing had anticipated, there was an embarrassing silence, followed by members of the sales team shaking their heads and commenting out loud. They were concerned about the bottle which was much taller than standard competitor products.

However, after much coercion they reluctantly agreed to introduce the new concept to their customers.



Things went pear-shaped after that. The sales team returned from visiting their customers with the news that they were not interested in stocking the new product. The bottles could not stand upright on their shelves or in their coolers and they had no other way of displaying them. They refused to invest in something they couldn't display properly.

The new product was scrapped.

Marketing had committed the cardinal sin. It had not done the things critical to influencing a successful outcome.

Firstly it had not fully identified all the people – both inside and outside the organisation – critical to the launch of a new product. Its extensive consumer research should also have been extended to retail customers.

Nor had it engaged and collaborated effectively with its stakeholders prior to completing the prototype. Had it spoken at length to sales about all aspects of the new product, including size, it would have had a much better understanding of the implications of the new design and may well have had the opportunity to modify the size of the packaging without impacting significantly on its design.

Effective engagement and collaboration would also have increased the chances of widespread acceptance, making the implementation process all the easier.

Instead marketing was left with a hefty design and launch bill but no new product to justify the spend.

It also left marketing feeling more alienated than ever from its sales division.

Although the marketing department's design work was second to none and its conclusions were based on diligent research, ultimately it had failed to influence the support of its stakeholders.

A universal problem

Marketing professionals are not alone in their failure to secure "buy-in" through effective influencing.

It is a universal problem across business, according to a new study by leading Australian learning and development company, the OPIC Group, with 70% of management professionals across corporate Australia requiring further development in order to lift their game.

They're not good at connecting with people who are critical to their success - particularly those we don't get on with or who come from other parts of business. They don't take the time to understand what inspires and motivates these people and usually don't get their input and co-operation when it comes to getting ideas and initiatives off the ground.

They don't build and maintain their networks especially well and when it comes to handling difficult issues and dealing with conflict, they run a mile.



While they may have the expertise and skills necessary to do the job, their inability to take the influential high-ground prevents them from being truly effective in their roles.

The over 1,500 middle and senior professionals (including CEOs) interviewed for the study included marketing, sales, IT, HR, accounting and engineering professionals.

Percentage breakdown by profession of those requiring assistance in developing their overall influencing capability

| Professionals | Those who require influencing skills |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| IT | 74% |
| Marketing | 72% |
| Engineering | 70% |
| HR | 67% |
| Sales | 63% |
| Accounting | 62% |

**It is also important to point out that the figures come from measuring individuals against their role requirements and should not be used for comparative purposes.*

Specific areas where professionals require further development

| Professionals | Networking | Engagement | Collaboration | Conflict Management | Strategic Influencing |
|---------------|------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Marketing | 8% | 1% | 16% | 6% | 58% |

Where marketing managers were concerned they did not score well with 72% requiring further assistance – their key failings being their inability to collaborate with stakeholders and their failure to influence at a more strategic level.

(Breakout box)

Becoming better influencers

To become better influencers, we recommend marketing professionals follow this step-by-step process:

BUILD STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS

- Identify all the people – both inside and outside your organisation - who impact on your area of business and who are important to your success and to the success of your projects and initiatives. In the case of marketing managers the key stakeholders would be sales people, consumers, customers, your direct team, managers from other business units such as operations and finance and people in the community who your business impacts on. Make sure your network includes **ALL** the relevant stakeholders – not just the ones you like. Just because there is occasional or even ongoing friction between marketing and sales, don't leave them outside your network. They are very important to you (as our case study marketers discovered) and could be the ones who make or break a campaign.

ENGAGE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- Once you know who is important to you, actively initiate meetings in order to understand what your stakeholders do and the challenges they face. Also show a willingness to engage in conversations outside your expertise. These meetings will also provide you with an insight into where you could potentially collaborate or share resources. It is not good enough to simply meet on one occasion. Networking with people needs to be an ongoing activity. These meetings need not necessarily be one-on-one cosy fireside chats but should also take the format of formal information swapping sessions with entire teams. Meetings with the sales team will enable your department to share consumer insights gleaned through research while at the same time gaining a greater understanding of retail customers' challenges, needs and opportunities.
- In our case study, the marketing department could have engaged with sales much earlier in the process to gain their thoughts about the consumer research. They may have also worked with the key accounts team to present this type of data to key retailers to gain their buy-in. This process would have built trust with the retailers and made them more likely to range the new line when it was presented.

COLLABORATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- Involve your key stakeholders as early as possible in the collaborative process. Simply including them at the end point of the decision-making process, is not enough. You need to find out what their ideas or views on issues are well in advance. Don't be prescriptive; listen to what they have to say first before offering your own views.
- Collaboration means asking questions. It means finding out how your stakeholders perceive an initiative and what their challenges and difficulties are. Collaboration is the process of finding common ground and getting agreement. However, it does not mean compromise. It means creating a product or campaign far superior to the one you originally devised.
- Marketing professionals rely heavily on being creative and on rigorous market research to support their case, sometimes unaware of the practicalities of the product they are creating and that it needs to meet customer requirements. In our case study, collaboration with sales early on would have resulted in a product that was a winner with consumers while at the same time meeting retail customer requirements. Collaboration with retailers would also have meant greater in-store support and the certainty of greater success.
- To become better collaborators, learn the difference between an expert way of influencing ('telling') and a broader selling approach, which tends to be more favoured by sales people. This involves working with stakeholders to take an idea from start to conclusion, with stakeholders often reaching the same conclusion as you. However the process is important because it gives the other party a feeling of control, contribution, and ownership. One of the great challenges for marketing professionals is that while they are often right because they base their ideas and conclusions on facts and procedurally accurate research, imposing this view on someone creates natural resistance. The resistance is not because the idea is wrong; it comes from the other person's sense of loss of control and self worth. Make them feel part of the process; you've got nothing to lose!

MANAGE CONFLICT

- Deal with it directly. Conflict is a normal part of the collaborative process but most people avoid it at all costs. We aren't prepared to talk about the elephant in the corner. As a result we leave the "undiscussables" undiscussed. Good influencers don't avoid conflict – they seek out any areas of disagreement and discuss these openly, in a positive and constructive way. They see conflict as normal and work effectively to resolve it. Where they are unable to deal with it themselves, they call in the experts. Remember, being right is not as important as getting the right outcome.

STRATEGIC INFLUENCING

- This not only involves identifying strategic opportunities which are mutually beneficially to all those involved but also involves engaging with stakeholders at a much deeper and more personal level – building trust as well as creating a strong ally.
- In our case study had the marketing department nurtured these more personal relationships with one or more people in sales, they would - as a matter of course - have sought their valued opinion about the product well in advance, averting unnecessary heartache.

What do our top marketers look like?

- They have a good grasp of who their key stakeholders are, inside and outside their organisations.
- They understand the value of broad-based networks and use these networks to achieve collaborative outcomes.
- They have an innate understanding of who they are and what their strengths and weaknesses are.
- They're very good at listening for content as well as underlying emotions. They have the ability to "read" people and adapt their behaviour accordingly.
- They're comfortable at engaging with everyone across the business and up and down the hierarchy.
- They give credit to those who've helped them achieve effective outcomes.

** Melbourne-based learning and development company, the OPIC Group, has been providing businesses across Australia with coaching, mentoring, training and career development solutions for over 14 years. The organisation also runs regular seminars on influencing, people development, leadership development and team building.*