

Brainwave series | No.3

Making mojo

The role of the creative proposition in technology marketing.

Take a look at any high tech trade magazine, particularly the ads. How many of them strike a chord with their intended audience? One or two? A handful?

And how many are impersonal, bland, and full of jargon? Yes – all the rest.

That's because most technology companies simply put a product image on the page and add a few words about bits and bytes, or other techno-babble. There's no 'pizzaz' or sparkle; not one magical, creative element that makes the reader think, "This is interesting/fun/intriguing/attractive/unusual/memorable/amazing."

Shouldn't those reactions be the ones we're trying to evoke as I.T. marketers? Don't the majority of technology firms realise that while their ads may be about machines, they're not marketing to machines? Where's the human element?

And it's not just the ads that are at fault. The technology sector is awash with communication campaigns, channel partner programmes, and marketing materials (e.g. websites, direct mail, brochures) that fail to properly address and interact with their intended audiences. Why? Because there's no creative proposition at their core – nothing that instinctively 'feels right' and grabs the reader.

Without this, other problems emerge. The company has less recognition in the market, gains fewer leads, experiences reduced sales, and – ultimately – begins to fail.

So what can technology marketers do about it? How can we put the creative proposition back where it belongs – at the centre of our communications?

Most technology companies seem to believe that the target audience fully understands their product or service. And that a list of technical specifications will persuade people to buy. The reality is very different.

Introduction

Given that trade press advertising often represents an I.T. company's most visible public face, it's a good place to start when considering that organisation's overall marketing approach. But strangely, in many cases, these ads don't appear to bear any relation to the company's over-arching business strategy, or even its concurrent tactical campaign(s).

Every advertisement stands alone, isolated from any of the advertiser's other communications – which are themselves often isolated. Both the communication and the company suffer as a result. The former has no context, so the reader isn't openly (or even subliminally) encouraged to see it as part of a wider plan; and by failing to have such a plan or to be consistent in its messaging, the company misses an opportunity to reinforce its branding with the audience.

Understanding the audience

What's more, communications like this have no intrinsic weight (or resonance with the reader) because there's no sign of a creative proposition – the single-minded thought that the communication should bring to life in a provocative and compelling way.

So, as well as having a deep understanding of their own product or service, companies need to see how they can satisfy the desires, dispel the fears, or play on any other of the human emotions felt by the intended audience.

The creative proposition

The creative proposition must:

- Trigger the appropriate human emotions in the reader, generating a positive 'gut-reaction' that makes the communication simply 'feel right'.
- Convert the product/service description into a message that will change the reader's behaviour.

The absence of a creative proposition explains why the vast majority of I.T. ads and other communication materials fail to mention the benefits that the product or service will deliver to the reader. Instead, a list of features or technical specifications appears. This does nothing to engage the reader, to spark the imagination, or to encourage action. In short, the ad fails to do its job properly.

Additionally, I.T. communications seldom establish a hierarchy of messages. Eager to overload the reader with as much information as possible, technology companies don't lead with the most important point. Instead, all of the issues are given equal billing, making it difficult for the reader to spot the main attraction. What's more, there's little or no attempt to distil the sales argument into easily-digestible nuggets.

No structure = poor results

Even if some structure is introduced, the key points aren't described from the reader's perspective, but rather from the manufacturer's point of view.

This lack of structured, consistent messaging not only reveals the absence of a creative proposition, but also has the potential to result in:

- Lead generation campaigns that lead nowhere.
- Direct marketing materials that go directly in the bin.
- Awareness-building ads that fail to prick the reader's consciousness.
- Relationship publications that don't connect.

So, with the pressure to justify ROI greater than ever, you ignore developing a creative proposition at your peril.

The creative proposition is vital to producing effective marketing that modifies behaviour. To establish such a single-minded thought, we have to return to the fundamentals of communication and understand the people we're addressing.

Communication fundamentals

In any communication, we must grab the audience's attention, maintain their interest, arouse their desire, and overcome any possible objections they may have with convincing arguments. Then, we can lead them to action.

Perhaps the first of these steps is the hardest. But researching your market and knowing what motivates, inspires, worries or otherwise affects your audience is the key to successfully achieving everything else. If you have no insight into your prospective customer, how can you expect to win their instinctive approval and change their attitude and behaviour?

But assuming you've done this necessary groundwork and can empathise with your target audience, you then have to step them through the remaining phases of the communication (and sales) process. Used effectively in ads – and other marketing communications – since the first TV campaigns appeared on US television in the 1950s, these stages can be summarised as A-I-D-C-A:

Attention – we must make the reader look at the communication.

Interest – we have to keep the reader interested in what we're saying.

Desire – we must persuade the reader that s/he wants what we have to sell.

Conviction – we have to convince the reader that it's safe to act.

Action – we must get the reader to take action.

The creative proposition is vital at every step and must inform the direction of the whole piece.

Grab attention

Use your creative proposition when considering your attention-grabbing headline and intriguing (or enticing) image – particularly if your communication is unsolicited. Your target is looking for an excuse to ignore your message – so don't provide a reason to do so by including irrelevant technical details. Rather, stop them in their tracks by asking a provocative question, or including a benefit statement, in your headline.

Going 'off-message' within your communication, at any point, will confuse and annoy your potential customer and ensure that your call to action is ignored.

Maintain interest

Expand on the proposition as you progress through the text. Generate interest by staying relevant to your reader's needs and talking about how they'll benefit. Your creative proposition should dramatise your sales message and appeal to your reader's emotions. Turn any technical benefits into tangible and understandable advantages that will resonate with your audience.

Arouse desire

By limiting your offer in some way, or by making your product or service more exclusive, you can arouse your audience's desire. For example, introduce a deadline for the reader's response and reward their timely reply with a discount. Or restrict the availability of your product or service, by raising the price, or by fulfilling only the first 100 orders received.

Provide conviction

Make sure you give your more sceptical readers the conviction to act. Back up your proposition with research, statistics, testimonials, etc. to persuade them that it's OK to buy whatever you're selling. Show that many other people have committed to your product or service, and that they're happy with it. If you have a new product on offer, try to demonstrate that potential customers have expressed a willingness to buy it.

Encourage action

Lastly, let your single-minded proposition play its part in your call to action. This is where you establish what you expect your audience to do after reading the communication. The call to action must be written as clearly as possible, and should always include a time-limit (as a way of arousing desire and encouraging a rapid response).

Keep the A-I-D-C-A sequence in mind during the creative process, but remember that it should remain invisible (and seamless) to your readers.

Developing your creative proposition

Your readers need to be able to instinctively 'get' the communication. As long as they do, they will be hooked immediately and your structure will lead them through to its logical conclusion: the action you want them to take.

So how do you develop the creative proposition that underpins your structure?

The first thing to remember is that your prospective customers probably don't want to read about your product's performance, the technical advances you've made in development, or the complementary services you're offering – or any other piece of information you have available – unless it answers their unspoken question: "What's in it for me?"

Understanding your reader (and your product or service) allows you to respond to that question in your communication, and this reply also informs the direction in which you develop your creative proposition.

Features and benefits

Start by listing the features and benefits of the product or service you want to promote. A feature is an indisputable fact about whatever it is you're offering. For example: "This external hard drive has 40GB of storage space."

Turn this into a benefit by asking: "How will this fact/feature improve the life of the reader – the intended user?" In other words, to identify the benefit, you must put yourself into your reader's shoes and ask: "What's in it for me?"

To continue with the example, you might imagine yourself as the reader and say: "Having 40GB of storage means I have enough space to save all my music and photos in one place, and to back-up my data files. So, I can relax in the knowledge that everything I need is safe and easily accessible."

Use any marketing insights and research intelligence that you have available to develop this sort of knowledge about your reader/intended purchaser, and his or her needs and motivations. Repeat the process until you've covered every aspect (feature) of the product or service you're promoting, turning each one into a benefit along the way. Then distil all of these benefits into a single, all-important thought – in this example, it might be: "Treasure your memories."

As you can see, this single thought somehow dramatises the emotional appeal of the product or service, and shows the reader how s/he will benefit. Combined with a strong visual hook, this creative proposition could underpin a series of communications by speaking directly to the needs of your target audience.

Virtually every piece of communication will be *more* effective if based upon a creative proposition. The *most* effective propositions have the built-in 'elasticity' to be applied to a variety of materials (and media).

Making marketing easier

Establishing a creative proposition actually makes the marketing effort far easier. When you've created a proposition that gets under the skin of your staff, prospects, and customers, you have a great tool for influencing their behaviour.

So which communications will benefit from a single-minded proposition?

- **Press ads** – a creative proposition can help attract attention, and step the reader through to a call to action.
- **Direct mail** – sustaining the reader's interest in a longer piece of communication depends on delivering a clear and consistent message.
- **Advertorial** – this type of communication can stand up to the reader's scrutiny by using a creative proposition at its heart.
- **Online ads** – the principles behind good communication apply online, although even more brevity may be needed.
- **Tech briefings** – base these documents around a single, compelling thought to make them easier to assimilate.

- **Seminars/events** – a creative proposition increases understanding and recall, and encourages attendees to make recommendations to colleagues.
- **Webcasts and videos** – a creative proposition can help add a visual 'thread' that makes the content easier to understand and remember.

Elasticity

Be aware of the 'elasticity' of your core idea. It's worth considering:

- Can the messaging really be refined to a single, specific point?
- Would a more populist, wider-ranging proposition have broader appeal?
- Would the sales process benefit from having a number of propositions, each one primed for a different external or internal audience?
- Is the proposition aspirational, selfish, or motivational? Does it play on fear, greed, or any other specific human characteristic?

Your proposition may have to take account of these factors, and you might need to interweave them to maximise impact. But the main point is this: the focus of the proposition must always be your customers – their needs, aspirations, and interests.

In the I.T. sector, we have a number of problems. Technology is intangible, complex, and constantly adapting and improving.

Neglecting the proposition

It's quite easy to see how creative propositions work with products like cars and holidays. These items are aspirational, and deliver clear benefits. And in many cases, the pure aesthetics of the product are appealing to the audience, and can be used to grab attention immediately.

But in the I.T. sector, we have a number of problems. Technology is intangible, complex, and constantly adapting and improving. What's more, our products aren't fashion items; they don't naturally arouse the senses or emotions. More often than not, they're nothing more than a box with wires at the back, a screen-shot from our latest software, or an intangible support or consultancy service.

So, in technology marketing, working out your creative proposition can be tough. This is undoubtedly just one of the reasons it's so often neglected. But whose fault is it? Who's killing the creative proposition?

- Some communication agencies are failing to deliver, even though they understand the importance of having a creative proposition. Are they stumped by the technology? Failing to understand the target audience? Or just downright lazy? Whatever the answer, no amount of designing and re-writing will rescue a poor creative proposition. If the basic concept isn't robust, you'll be wasting your time and money.

- Channel partners may be diluting the creative process. Perhaps they want to adopt a 'pile it high and shout about the price' approach. While this may have some emotional appeal (to the price-conscious), it's a limited strategy that won't work with all products and services, or with as wide an audience as you may want to target.
- Technology manufacturers themselves could be watering down the creative proposition too. There's a tendency to add more information at each creative milestone, as marketers run scared of committing to one particular message. There can also be a lack of decisiveness – or even consensus – about what a product or service really does.

What's the solution?

Clearly, you must do more than acknowledge the importance of developing and using a creative proposition – you also have to do the hard work and make it happen. Or find an agency to do it for you.

Either way, brainstorming to create the creative proposition and allowing it to form the backbone of your communications is the best way to get the ROI you need on your marketing spend.

Here's a creative proposition check-list.
Use it to maximise your ROI and to make sure your marketing communications are more effective.

The creative proposition should unite all the elements of your marketing campaign, but it can be tough to develop and even harder to implement across all communications.

The 6-step check-list

The first steps require in-depth research, an interest in the needs of your prospective customers, and the discipline to keep refining and testing your proposition:

1. Understand the motivations and demands of your audience – this is the key to having emotional appeal within your communications.
2. Distil the technical components of your product or service into benefits – this allows you to engage your audience with relevant information and to answer each reader's, "What's in it for me?" question.
3. Establish the elasticity that's required from your proposition – where, when and how do you intend to use it?

The next steps involve delivering your creative proposition across a range of communication materials, remembering that the width of the spectrum depends on the elasticity of your single-minded thought.

This means that you need to have:

4. An emotionally-charged concept – an idea that not only grabs the readers' attention, but also stays with them long after the initial exposure.
5. A solid messaging structure – this should follow the reliable A-I-D-C-A sequence, drawing each of your readers towards action.
6. A communication that's robust – strong enough to be seen in isolation, but also a coherent part of your overall messaging strategy.

Properly used and executed, a creative proposition will make your marketing communications work harder – and deliver a better return on your investment.

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