

MARKETING: RE-THINKING YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND RE-ASSESSING YOUR STRATEGY

ABSTRACT

Our sector is gaining remarkable attention. As the number of older adults increases, discourse and disruption abounds. While policymakers and frontline program leadership are exploring vehicles to reach more seniors and adapt to a shifting demographic, the “market” is exploding with new entrants who offer an array of services tailored to the growing needs. In parallel, the media world has grown in complexity with new channels, methods, and a 24-7 cycle of personalized messages for every category of personal tastes and interests.

At the intersection of these changes is a tremendous opportunity to pivot our practices to harness the future. Never before have we seen the level of competition that today’s landscape presents. We can no longer assume that we are the only option available to provide meals (and services) to seniors. Therefore, how do we communicate value, illustrate impact, and preserve relevance in a crowded market? A revisit of your thinking and your strategy surrounding “marketing” may shed light on the way forward.

WHAT IS MARKETING?

Oftentimes, marketing is narrowly defined as simply: “outreach” or “communications.” There are two challenges with these misnomers: first, the terms convey a philosophical and logistical one-directional approach, and second, there is a widely-accepted implication that the “outreach” or “communications” platform has been pre-designed at the national agency level with a further assumption that it will seamlessly cascade and apply across our nation’s vast and diverse communities.

These approaches and assumptions are antithetical to popular 21st Century marketing doctrine, which has morphed substantially since the 1950s advertising era—when consumer choice was quite limited, thus, allowing an oversimplified marketing program of “hey, look this product/service is for sale, you should buy it” to work. Instead, marketing has become a sophisticated machine demanding multi-faceted, multi-directional, and multi-channel operations. Consequently, operationalizing this flawed thinking exposes gaps, creating fissures for competition to develop improved products and services and orchestrate the marketing platform to support them.

Customer-centric

At the core, marketing is customer-centric. It’s folly to assume all audiences are uniform, primarily because it simply isn’t true. We know consumer expectations are changing, largely driven by a mix of culture change, technology advances, and corporate America’s “have it your way” promise to give consumers delightful experiences on their terms. There are also practical customizations as well as a result of medical/lifestyle needs including special dietary requirements and the diverse

national tapestry prompting demand for ethnic palates. Using a one size fits all strategy, likely becomes, one size fits none.

Expert marketing strategists are curious about consumers and have a deep desire to learn what makes each of them tick. Billions of dollars are invested to support teams of researchers and strategists assembled to understand audiences' demographics (age, race, income, zip code) and, more importantly, the nuanced facets of audiences' psychographics (behaviors, motivations, interests, and desires). An entire sub-industry called User Experience Research and Design has emerged to support this growing business function.

Strategic

Marketing's ultimate goal is to influence consumer decision-making—at both the macro and micro level—which is why over the past two decades “marketing” has been increasingly moving out from a simple ancillary business function and into the robust responsibility ranks of the C-suite. There are many practical reasons for this shift, which can be most simply represented through some academic models.

In the 20th Century, the marketing models were simple and one directional, as with the reference to “outreach.” Two popular models used were “the 4 Ps” and *AIDA*. The 4 Ps model stated that a solid marketing program would need to be comprised of: Product (the features and benefits of what is being sold), Price (how much these products cost), Promotion (messages and incentives to raise awareness) and Placement (retail and media outlets used to get the product in front of people).

AIDA is an acronym for Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action often represented as a funnel, or a bucket. *AIDA* and the 4 Ps often worked in tandem. The theory goes: the number of people aware of your product/service would move through a funnel by way of strategic marketing to get them to an action—more than likely a sale. With this logic, increased advertising or marketing at the top of the funnel would increase “awareness” making your subsequent numbers bigger, leading to more sales. However, the caution is in the exit points or “holes in the bucket” where the marketing program falls short of expectations or is victim to competition, resulting in loss of customers who can potentially move through Action.

Overtime, these models had to be adapted and expanded as sophistication grew (more Ps were added, the funnel became a cycle) resulting in a cumbersome, beyond recognition of the original simplified models. So, experts replaced them with modern thinking and advanced models. There are many models in practice today (and they continue to shift and be refined) ranging from beginner to advanced and marketing specialties.

Holistic

As models shifted, so did professional roles and responsibilities. The most common single-discipline roles from that era including graphic designer, copywriter, and media buyer have been

replaced with interdisciplinary experts who have a bigger seat at the table, and the conversation is much more comprehensive. One aspect that remains unchanged, however, is marketing's function to influence decision making, only now we're aware that the decision making is happening at the macro and the micro level. Yes, as with AIDA, at the macro level people are moving along a continuum. However, concurrently, at the microlevel there are strategic touchpoints of persuasion and affirmation. In a light-hearted way, it's almost a strategic game of Chutes and Ladders.

Let's introduce a working model to use to adapt and pivot your marketing operations in order to remain competitive.

Awareness - Action - Loyalty - Service

Represented as a cycle, this model implies a full life cycle with your audience with key nodes—from *Awareness* (knowledge of or familiarity with the product/service) to *Action* (a strategic touchpoint of interest from the audience, this could be a phone inquiry, a web form submission, an email open, or a subscription, etc.) to *Loyalty* (a physical and emotional relationship of varying degrees of commitment) finally capped off with an expectation of *Service* (anticipating and responding to the needs of your growing customer base). Take note of all the possible exit paths. As with AIDA, there are touchpoints where pitfalls can occur in the normal course of the life cycle. This is the role of testing and analytics to understand where weak points are in your value chain. The strategic job is to identify them, the tactical job is to resolve them. Each node is dynamic in its own right, suggesting the marketing team spans business units in a hub and spoke type relationship to advance the goals of each of the nodes.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?

Now that we have conquered the landscape shifts and abstract concepts at play, it's important to understand the underpinnings of the tactics to deploy—specifically, the ability to draw distinctions and connections between them.

Strategy - *These are the intangible who, what, and how that drives internal action.*

At the intersection of your organization's purpose, your audience's needs, and the services you provide lies your strategy—a dynamic platform that allows organizations to ideally provide best-in-class products/services built on a reliable brand. Pay critical attention to this opportunity to refine and sharpen your approach based on a thorough understanding of what is sometimes taken for granted. Leadership and frontline staff alike should weigh in to shape strategy with leadership responsible to ensure alignment with mission, goals, and audience expectations.

Expression - *These are the tangible tools produced to communicate value externally.*

Immediately stemming from a brand strategy, audience analysis, and media channel planning, the marketing expression consists of an assortment of assets built with the verbal messages (abstract frames and copywriting) and visual design aesthetics (color and imagery) that are hyper-customized to meet the customer where they are. Here is where marketing material design and

development begin spanning the full media spectrum—print to web to social media and physical experiences. Leadership should identify a specialized team (and give them creative latitude!) to plan and execute the marketing expression based on the strategy defined.

Management - *These are the daily operations, scalable insight, and opportunities for innovation.* Employing a deep level of empathy and installing a consumer feedback loop into operations means management is multi-faceted and ongoing. Teams of product managers are emerging to shepherd the success of the entire life cycle of a product or service. It's here where strategy and tactics connect and collaborate within the model discussed (Awareness - Action - Loyalty - Service). Leadership teams should constantly align teams, offerings, and refresh tactics across the entire organization.

WHAT WORKS?

It's time to "meet them where they are," and "they" are everywhere! Due to 21st Century disruptions, opportunities are endless. This tactics checklist is a handy tool to assess your state of communication operations.

CATEGORY
<p>Humanize messages Acronyms and cryptic government speak don't resonate with "mom" and can sometimes add to the stigma of aging. Reframing your story (the visual and verbal) are essential to being a player in today's crowded mediasphere.</p> <p>PRO TIP > Replace program names like "congregate meals" with plain language such as "community meals." People don't want to be thought of as a number, speak to them as you would an everyday friend with real needs.</p>
<p>Design to impress Perception is everything. Drab or outdated color palettes or stick figure logos read: <i>irrelevant</i>, causing consumers to look for other contemporary options.</p> <p>PRO TIP > Rethink your expression to shine bright among other players. Every color and shape has a psychology, keep it clean and streamlined by using harmonious palettes of secondary and tertiary colors and simple shapes to avoid a distracting design.</p>
<p>Optimize digital experiences Digital marketing, mobile-friendly websites, and search engine and social feed optimization are just the basics. If your website is inaccessible to modern consumers, you are virtually locked out from telling your story and reaching your audience.</p> <p>PRO TIP > Make a list of three things a target audience might be looking for, then ask an unbiased team member to find that information. Watch them as they navigate your website, Google, or Facebook. Have them verbalize what they are querying or clicking on. Is the result</p>

what you intended?

Craft content

Move away from adding clutter and noise to the mediasphere and balance your portfolio of content. Direct marketing has a specific purpose: to drive a call to action: “attend an event” or “deadline ends Monday.” Content marketing, on the other hand, is an entirely new genre of messaging that is used to engage and move the consumer along the value chain to increase loyalty and trust via delightful content that is entertaining, educational, or inspirational.

PRO TIP > Create an editorial calendar of all your media channels: social media, email, mail, etc. How often will you communicate on those channels, what topics will you convey, are there additional visual assets you can use to reduce the amount of words?

Find talent

Who is doing all this work? You may have access to a marketing team, a tech team, or even an outside vendor. Your job is to level the silos by integrating the teams so they are aligned on effort and maximizing on their individual strengths.

PRO TIP > Multidisciplinary talent matters. The 21st Century workforce is purpose-driven, bringing a wide range of skill sets to a workplace that can deliver on their personal mission. Assemble your teams (internal and external) based on your needs, not a vacant org chart slot. Human capital is your greatest resource—choose them wisely.