

Best Practices: Go-to-Market Strategy

A New Paradigm

Rich Herbst

Back in B-school and in my corporate marketing training, I was taught to think of marketing planning in three steps: objectives, strategies, tactics. This was and is, after all, the classic approach to business planning.

Today I'm going to commit a major heresy and pitch that model out the window.

Now I'm not saying that strategic thinking is bad. Quite the opposite. A sound strategy is critical to business success. My beef is that strategy is often done so poorly that it's of little use. I've seen many, many marketing plan documents that weren't much more than a bunch of puffed-up words in an overly-large document, conveying almost nothing of value.

What do we do then? I suggest we look to another industry for a planning paradigm. Let's consider the automotive industry and the process used there for developing new vehicles.

For many years the auto industry also suffered from ineffective planning. Especially through the '70s and the '80s the U.S. auto industry was delivering a series of marginal vehicle designs while the Japanese were taking great steps ahead. But then a major shift occurred in which the U.S. manufacturers began using a "platform" approach to design.

In the platform approach, an engineering/design team creates a very robust and versatile vehicle platform. That platform, then, is used to build out multiple vehicle designs. Great care and thought goes into the platform design, because it is intended to be used for years.

What might it look like to use a similar approach in marketing planning? And what benefits might be gained? In a platform-oriented planning process, the endless cycling of annual marketing plans would shift toward developing a more rigorous planning framework intended for a multi-year time span. This go-to-market framework would embody several core components:

- A clear identification of the central "drivers" of market performance
- A rigorous definition of the core metrics of progress
- A well-architected arraying of programs to support and move the "drivers"
- Set-up of multiple paths of activity to build out programs to move the plan forward

Let's elaborate a bit on each of these.

“Drivers” of Market Performance – For each business there is a pivotal process that happens within the customer engagement lifecycle. It's the moment of truth when customer engagement either happens or not. Some examples:

- For a manufacturer of trendy clothing for teens, the pivotal moment may be when a distinctive brand image is registered within the mind of the target. If the brand registers powerfully, the teen will seek out that brand – either at retail or online – to buy.
- For a producer of candy, the pivotal process may be in securing ‘best’ placement at retail for impulse purchase.
- For a maker of audio equipment, the pivotal process may lie in the sales process at retail. If the manufacturer attains focus and excitement among retail salespeople, success follows.
- For an advertising agency or consultancy, the pivotal moment may lie in the “pitch”. This is the moment when agencies get their moment “at bat” to land a new client.

Our goal here is to find the most pivotal process – i.e., the central driver – upon which success depends. And while every business depends on multiple drivers, we want to be clear as to which is really most pivotal.

Core Metrics of Progress – Once the central driver is identified, metrical tracking becomes the way to attain powerful focus as well as continuing improvement. Again, every business will use an array of metrics to measure performance and progress. But we want to know which metric is most central to success – and which is most predictive of future success.

For example, the clothing manufacturer above might use a customer survey – and/or a well-crafted monitoring of social media buzz – to develop an overall brand imagery score.

Arraying of Programs – The go-to-market framework comes to life as programs are arrayed that can predictably move the market drivers. Again using the example of the clothing manufacturer, the program array might include a combination of Web and print advertising plus social media tactics as the primary programs for seeding and shaping the desired brand imagery. The programs are designed to move the central driver (and its key metric), and that moves the business.

Paths of Activity – Today's marketing world is highly dynamic, so I recommend thinking in terms of paths of activity as opposed to static plans. Cutting edge marketing requires continuous and sometimes rapid iterations of programming, especially when Digital tactics are used and/or the competitive field is changing rapidly.

Tying it all together, if our clothing manufacturer is clear that the propagation of its brand image is the central driver of business growth, then it must array a series of smart programs to accomplish that shift in brand image. It must track progress on the central metric, and continually iterate and tune its programs to optimize the effort. The go-to-market framework is what keeps the continuing effort focused and consistent.

Is the earlier model of objectives/strategies/tactics dead? Not really. If you think about it, objectives, strategies, and tactics are fully embedded within the go-to-market framework approach I advocate here. If anything, I am proposing that the classic thinking be integrated into a more robust framework-development process to give marketing plans greater power and continuity.

– Rich Herbst