Third Times the Charm

- A B2B marketer's journey to find the right marketing partner

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There is a belief that when you attempt something for the third time, you are more likely to succeed than the previous two attempts. This is enshrined in the phrase 'try, try and try again'.

When you try the first time you are still experimenting, not knowing what to expect. The second time, you analyze and find out what exactly you require to seal the deal; hence, the third time you hit the nail on the head.

Ok, so what does the idiom have to do with B2B marketing? Our experience tells us that B2B marketers typically go through two not so successful attempts before they find the optimal approach and an effective partner for their marketing efforts.

Agency

Name for the arrangement where an agent intermediates between buyers and sellers and charges a commission for his participation. The agent buys and sells for the account of the client, but the client assumes all risk.

First Time – The Process

We all have grown up watching nifty TV commercials and been awed by the creativity of many of them. Marketing in business school had heavy emphasis on advertising and we were familiarized with many of the big name advertising agencies.

So it is natural, when a marketer wants a partner they start looking for advertising agencies.

Then of course, there is the customary short listing and “pitching” process. The agencies are short listed first on their overall credentials and called for a pitch. They are given minimal information or access to top management and are supposed to create some sample work or a pitch.

During the pitch presentation many creative ideas are presented and agencies clamor for your business depending on “how much they think your media spend can be”.

An agency is selected based on many parameters, the primary one being the “creativity” of their ideas and the “wow” factor of their pitch presentation.

First Time – The Experience

We all know that falling in love is different from holding a relationship. The initial headiness and euphoria needs to make way to tangible value in a relationship.

Once an agency is selected and the dating period is over, here is what clients typically experience.

Flashes of brilliance but no guiding light

Once a client is acquired, typically the relationship moves to execution very fast. It seems like strategy is needed only to get an account and not to make an impact for the client. All the buzz words disappear and what remains are flashes of individual brilliance not tied together. The dip-stick studies and research almost seem like agency sales tools and don't seem to cross the walls between the client servicing and the creative departments.

What propounds this is that, the senior management (or strategists) disappear and the client is relegated to “client servicing team” who is at best effective coordinators of various execution activities.

It's all about the glamour or is it?

The geeks go to technology and B2B businesses, the cool crowd goes to creative field and there seems to be no bridge in between.

Given their focus on “slick” and creative thinking, the ad agency team has a propensity to come up with ideas that “wow” but are averse to any cohesive thinking in presenting a complex value proposition. One could say in their defense, if one had to deal with a complex solution one would become an engineer and not a marketing person.

The ideas are focused on “attention getting” rather than sustaining interest. They are focused on feelings and impulse rather than developing a trusted partner feeling, geared to drive short term sales rather than create and support demand.

The energy is spend on creating another table top calendar that no one really wants, rather than create thought leadership that positions the client as a trusted advisor with their end customers.

You spend I earn

Entrusting an ad agency with creating a media plan is like allowing a fox to guard the henhouse. One would think, no one will assign a job to someone who will be in a position to exploit it for his own ends. Increasing your Ad spend is clearly in the ad agencies favor as they get their commission on media buying, not to mention other incentives given by media houses.

The result is heavy emphasis on ATL (above the line) spending rather than the more effective BTL (below the line) approach. BTL is just too much hard work for very little return - for the agency!

Expert

An expert, or so my Websters informs me, is someone who is "very skillful; having much training and knowledge in a special field."

Second Time - The Process

Disenchanted with the result, the marketer takes matters in their own hands and decides not to hire any one agency but to manage all the work internally and enlist and hire experts to help with parts.

The client typically hires a marketing person. Depending on the size of the company this person may be a junior level person or a senior level person to coordinate all the marketing activities of the organization. They then start creating different collaterals such as identity, brochures, website and so on by working with different specialists or vendors.

These specialists may be strategic consultants, branding consultants, web designers, print designers, exhibition designers, and media agencies.

Second Time - The Experience

What follows is an experience that feels disjointed and too cumbersome for the sporadic results achieved - it's like you are never in the top gear.

The magic pill attitude

Many of the specialists are married to their discipline and feel that their contribution alone would bring in excellent results. While each discipline is important and each expert's services valuable, the attitude that a part can drive superlative results skews the focus from integrating with the larger thought.

Even if a specialist realizes that the value of their contribution is less in the bigger picture they have no incentive to communicate that. For example, no branding specialist is likely to say to a tracking systems company that they don't have to spend as much on identity as an FMCG company should probably spend.

Get it right in one go

Hiring a specialist typically means that their scope of work starts and finishes in one go, with little natural opportunity for follow-up. A strategic consultant coming in at the start may come up with good direction setting, however, as the implementation occurs there is a clear value of refining the strategy. A designer may come in and create good first set of launch materials, however, if the follow up communication is not consistent in design the impact is lost. The specialists rarely have the incentive to come in for smaller follow up work.

Good luck with the transmission, hope the car works

When you need transportation would you buy the parts separately and put them together? Working with many specialists is pretty much like assembling a car. The incremental value of specialization may not offset the risk of failure in integration.

Your organization would then have to ensure that the all the pieces integrate with the strategy and long term goals.

Partner

One that is united or associated with another or others in an activity or a sphere of common interest.

Third times the charm

From the first experience the marketer learns the value of strategic thinking and long term consistency. The second experience teaches them the value of an integrated approach where the whole, orchestrated consistently, is larger than the parts.

Now the marketer is ready for an integrated Communication Design partner who can not only operate at a strategic level but also can implement with the strategy as the anchor.

Of course even with an integrated marketing partner there is need for certain specialists like photographers or event managers, however, the marketing partner is more like a “brand custodian” and works with the other providers.

Start with the end in mind

A business without a strategy is a rudderless ship. No surprise there. What is surprising is the number of organizations that do not connect the strategy with the marketing plan and the communication design execution. The strategy even if clearly defined stays with the top management.

An integrated partner would spend effort upfront in the understanding the strategy and clarifying it before they start any execution work. This appreciation of strategy ensures that the marketing plan is aligned and tweaked to meet strategic goals.

This understanding of strategic goals allows your integrated marketing partner to be a “brand keeper” who then makes course correction in alignment with the strategic goals.

Full ownership

Full involvement and full responsibility means full accountability. A partnership for the full life cycle of the marketing effort creates full ownership of the process and results. The partner is not only interested in a campaign doing well but is also interested in ensuring that the net impact is as expected. So whether it is a course correction or building on past efforts, full ownership results in increased effective branding and communication efforts.

Many a times, campaigns are built and are excellent when evaluated in isolation. While ads may be released one at a time, a brand is built through certain amount of consistency over time. An integrated partner can ensure that each effort is adding consistency and value to the long term brand equity.

Relationship that delivers and grows

B2B solutions are typically complex. Even if the solutions are not complex, the value proposition and the buying process are definitely complex. This complexity of products and processes require in-depth understanding of the industry, offerings, and customers.

Working with an integrated partner, ensures that there is retained knowledge about your industry and business that can be leveraged over time. As you work with the same partner, effectiveness of the partnership increases and so does the productivity.

Moreover, both parties appreciate the value add and ease of doing business with each other.

Get it right the first time!

How you present your company has a significant impact on your business's potential. Cutting corners on your marketing efforts may save you some money but in the bargain you may hamper your growth potential. Having a piecemeal approach simply slows your progress and creates patchiness in your efforts.

So my advice to B2B marketers – take your time to find the right integrated partner and then go ahead full steam. Not just get started but make sure you have consistent efforts, as they do pay off handsomely in the longer run.