

Extending B-to-B Branding Through (and to) the Channel

A key difference between consumer and business-to-business branding is the influence of selling channels, including sales reps, dealers and distributors. While many consumer products are also sold through a channel, the marketer generally reaches past the channel with branding messages, relegating the channel to the status of a local point of sale. By contrast, in many B-to-B markets, the local dealer or distributor really *owns* the end customer and can control access and communications to and from the customer.

This fact influences every part of B-to-B branding. Since the brand definition must encompass the entire customer experience with the brand, the distribution channel must be part of the branding process. It isn't enough to implement *internal branding* to ensure that your employees and sales reps reflect your branding in their attitudes and actions. You'll want to work with your channel so that everyone that interacts with the customer reflects your branding. To achieve this, B-to-B marketers are challenged to market to the channel as well as through the channel.

To the Channel

Having sales representatives, dealers, and distributors *live the brand* or even reflect and support the brand in their own communications requires deliberate effort. While they are, in fact, a channel to your audience, they should also be thought of as a primary audience for communications about your brand. As a result, having a consistent message presented by all of your representatives is a key component of brand differentiation. To really become *brand ambassadors* who influence the beliefs and perceptions of your brand, your channel partners must understand your brand deeply.

This means supplying all facets of the channel with the appropriate materials and information to help them support the brand message at the customer level and giving them ready access to your branding tools and materials so they can use them in their marketing. That's why it is no accident that most manufacturers' extranets are initially developed to serve distribution organizations and provide channel partners with deep access into information and systems to help drive the sales of the manufacturer's products. Channel extranets are ideal tools for making your branding information and tools readily available.

Through the Channel

How does *channeling the brand* affect the positioning of the distributor's business? In the presence of a strong brand, do they just become the local sales outlet, or can their *added value* message co-exist with the brand message? The answer to these questions depends on both the manufacturer and the distributor.

A recent survey found that control engineers prefer to have technical questions addressed by manufacturers and not by distributors. This is a clear message to those manufacturers to either focus more attention on the technical savvy of their distributors or add internal technical staff to handle customer questions. It is also a clear message that distributors play a key role in the customer's overall perception of the brand because they are an important part of the customer's experience with the brand. Customers need to know where they can go for technical support.

If the manufacturer wants to promote its own customer service and technical support, it must communicate this intent with the distributor and supply the distributor with useful information about this resource. Likewise, if the distributor chooses to focus its own message on service and support, they still have the option to do so while continuing to support their brands.

Co-marketing and Branding

Since distributors often *own* access to their local markets, it is important for brand communications to include elements relevant to their territories. Co-marketing programs are highly effective for this purpose.

Essentially, co-marketing programs form a partnership between a manufacturer and its channel partners to increase sales and to coordinate messages delivered to the customer. A co-marketing program can be as simple as a per-project agreement between a manufacturer and its channel partners to help defray the cost of advertising or other communications. Or, it can be as formal as an agreement that gives each channel member access to marketing support (in the form of funding) based on a percentage of the member's sales. In both cases, the goal is to support the manufacturer's brand in the marketplace and drive potential buyers to the channel for sales opportunities.

If properly defined and managed, a co-marketing program can effectively integrate branding strategies into a single, unified message. Channel partners take brand-building communications and leverage them at the regional or local level, while integration and repetition help build awareness. Having everyone in the distribution chain delivering the same message and using the same support materials provides a tremendous advantage by significantly reducing the *distance* between the manufacturer and its customers. Also, co-marketing gives the distributor or dealer access to cost-effective marketing support that, in many cases, they would be unable to afford if they acted independently. Maximizing the distributor's or dealer's exposure while minimizing their expenses will help the manufacturer build the loyalty that will build the brand.

At a strategic level, manufacturers and their channels can enter into a co-branding relationship. In co-branding, manufacturers trust distribution to deliver on some aspects of the brand promise, as might be the case, when a distributor or dealer is responsible for providing a high level of service—more than a simple delivery or installation. Such a complementary bond strengthens the business partnership by more fully defining how the distributor adds value to the customer relationship.

CHANNELING THE BRAND: IDEAS THAT CONNECT

1. B-to-B marketers must market to the channel as well as through the channel.
2. Sales representatives, dealers and distributors play a large role in the customer's perception of a brand.
3. Getting the sales channel to support your brand requires deliberate effort.
4. Co-marketing programs can effectively integrate branding strategies into a single, unified message.

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