

## Big Ideas and the 'Big R'

**Headmint's George Shepherd reflects on how developing skills to be 'different' can help you gain competitive edge, particularly during a recession.**

These days, it's pretty well accepted that a customer-focused approach to building brands can help drive top-line growth, by attracting new customers and retaining them through repeat purchases. The very best organisations tap into an even higher-level emotional connection with their customers, developing loyalty 'beyond reason'. Yakety yak.

But in difficult economic times, how can organisations maintain their focus on brand positioning and build their marketing capabilities to successfully achieve this?

Marketing budgets can work more efficiently by linking skills development into real business problems, creating a common marketing culture and spreading examples of best practice across the organisation; competitive edge in its own right. To keep your customers satisfied, you must continue to deliver great products and services, which means continuing to build your marketing and communication skills.

Your competitors are likely to cut back on this. By not cutting back, your brands have the prospect of getting ahead. But consider this: if you're developing the same skills as everyone else, how good is the investment? Do you really return a true advantage?

### Been there, done that

Of course, it's all very well telling people to build their 'marketing capabilities' - but what does that really mean? There's not much point building capabilities so that all marketers have the same set of approaches to similar problems. Most companies in most industries have tunnel vision - a kind of 'black spot'. They pursue the same opportunities that everyone else is pursuing - they overlook the same opportunities that everyone else is overlooking. It's the people that know how to see a different game that ultimately win large.

### What do you see that the competition doesn't see?

Brands are about competition. To succeed, your brand has to do things better than your competitors. In a recession, it's not uncommon for companies to lose focus on everything but cutting costs. Among other things, they may stop thinking about customer satisfaction, which inevitably leads to customer dissatisfaction. This gives your brands the opportunity both for higher-level engagement with customers and ultimately to capture market share.

So, by developing marketing capability in tough times, smart companies ensure that they are marketing as efficiently, effectively and consistently as possible. By sharing best practice in their organisations, they're maximising ROI and boosting the effectiveness of their marketing people and investments. It should be more strategic than 'just training', because it's a chance to revamp your collective marketing competency, rather than simply improving an individual's skills and behaviour.

Right? Yes, but just one note of caution...

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## Develop the skills to be different

Good marketing capability programmes teach consistency, don't they? Of course, making sure that there is internal consistency is critically important. However, teaching people how to think in the same way as their competitors is maybe not such a great idea. Processes and protocols that are too tight can create an atmosphere that stifles creativity. Marketers continue to use the same old thinking with each new initiative.

In a recession, the 'big R', brand teams need skills to keenly search for the opportunities their competitors either don't, or maybe can't see. It's about breaking away from the herd mentality and facing up to each new challenge from an entirely new point of view. The most creative marketers don't aspire to learn from the 'best in class', especially when the best in class aren't all that remarkable. Instead, they look far outside their categories and their typical ways of thinking - for that ultimately leads to market advantage.

## Practical magic

Even in the best of economic times, it's crucial that marketing capability development can be practically applied. Often we hear of training courses that were "interesting but too theoretical". The trick is to address real brand strategy issues in the training event itself.

In that way, seminars and workshops can help develop effective brand strategies, while at the same time introducing marketing teams to a set of new tools and techniques that can be used back at the ranch on other problems. So, the output is a new brand-strategy blueprint and a fresh set of tools.

## Marketing skills 'tight-loose'

On the one hand, brand teams need to be given clear tools and processes to help write an ad brief, for example. That way they can ensure briefs are founded on powerful insights and clear positioning. That's *tight*. On the other, they need creative ways of looking at old light through new windows. That's *loose*.

Teach people to have thorough analysis, meticulous strategic thinking and demanding evaluation, but in a more energetic, animated and inventive way. Inspire your team to produce BETTER IDEAS for LESS MONEY.

Now, that's a radical thought!

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