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Brand-Aid: How Strategic Tactics Drive Cabinet Sales

Commentary

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[October 2005](#)

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A homeowner walks into a kitchen showroom clutching an advertisement torn from a home decor magazine. She refers a showroom designer to the "cocoa mocha" cabinets depicted in the ad's ubiquitous "beauty shot" and inquires: "What do you have in this?"

The designer now faces a fundamental problem. The 'this' coveted by the homeowner is manufactured by more than one cabinet company. In fact, all of the companies that exhibit product lines in this showroom offer some sort of cocoa mocha finish – and they're compelled to sell it in a variety of styles and materials.

So, what separates one cocoa mocha cabinet from another? What qualities and values do manufacturers embrace and truly make their own? How well do they communicate these differences throughout the dealer channel? How easy do they make it for dealers to understand and articulate features and benefits to consumers? In short, whose cocoa mocha cabinet line does the designer recommend, and why?

As companies vie for their share of new construction and remodeling dollars, these questions gain relevance by the minute. For more than a decade, kitchen cabinet manufacturers reaped a whirlwind of good fortune from strong new housing starts and a growing remodeling market. Companies that made relatively decent products enjoyed robust sales as a function of distribution, all without having to build strong brands.

Consequently, the kitchen cabinet segment now tends to think of the word "brand" solely as a relationship with an end consumer. This manifests itself in a mind-numbing aura of monotony

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among competing products. The result: Everyone hypes selection, finish, options, delivery and service in marketing materials, and all claims are invariably supported by beautiful pictures of cabinets.

Consider a sampling of descriptive verbiage from some recent cabinet print advertisements:

- ◆ ...*Numerous woods, finishes and storage options. A plethora of styles, hardware and trim. Unequalled value. Fast turnaround helps you meet tight scheduling...* Translation: We're everything to everybody, and here's a glamour shot of our cherry wood line for good measure. What do this company, its cabinets and its people really stand for? And how well does this resonate with dealers who carry multiple lines?
- ◆ ...*Today and tomorrow, the freedom of choice helps you meet your customers' needs...* Actually, the freedom of choice lets cabinet manufacturers turn the lights on every day – it's the price of admission, but not the foundation for a strong brand.

There are lots more examples. Not long ago, our agency looked at a random sampling of 40 kitchen cabinet print ads. Of those, 30 emphasized broad selection and on-time delivery, while 38 featured a beauty shot as the predominant graphic element. We found only one company in the entire industry with the guts to forego a beauty shot, take a creative approach and really stand for something – in its case, superior design and function.

People walk into cabinet showrooms holding magazine ads because they have no concept of brand and no confidence in what a manufacturer can provide. When an industry markets itself almost exclusively with beauty shots, the implications bode poorly for all involved. If every company uses the same language to sell its products, dealers are left to decide what separates one cabinet line from another. Manufacturers have steadily ceded brand building responsibility to the dealer channel. This, in turn, often strains a dealer's credibility with consumers, and ultimately, it prevents consumers from making truly informed buying decisions.

The fact that dealers can sell a low-cost kitchen cabinet into a high-priced house screams volumes about the challenges this industry faces. High-end homeowners who understand the value of certain products will almost always demand access to them. Very few million-dollar homes feature laminate countertops or builder-grade appliances. Yet stories abound about low-end cabinets being installed in otherwise state-of-the-art kitchens. Why? Because most companies have not risen to the challenge of creatively articulating the specific benefits their cabinets offer within that space. If I can comprehend, for example, why a Viking range will improve my cooking, I should also understand ways in which high-end cabinets will make my life better.

That same challenge holds true in lower-priced homes. Companies can still sell custom cabinets at modest price points, as long as they clearly validate why they represent exceptional value for the dollar. Brands can make a compelling case to consumers, but in the end, they also must be relevant to a dealer's business.

Looking ahead, we see an opportunity for kitchen cabinet manufacturers to build great brands with the dealer channel and teach designers and showroom reps how to sell their products better. Many cabinet manufacturers may not have the resources necessary to devise and implement a true pull-through strategy, but they still can build brand strategies that touch consumers through the dealer channel, and do so cost effectively.

Strong brands can be based on anything from service and craftsmanship to durability, value – even sustainable design. Who out there, for example, sells the most environmentally correct kitchen cabinet? It may be a niched brand, but it's valid enough in some parts of the country for dealers to take sharp notice.

Whatever the case, *stand for something*. Own it. If it's quality, be the best. If it's finish, find a unique way to prove it. If your service culture trumps all others, demonstrate it. And if it comes down to beauty, describe beauty differently; develop highly emotive messaging and creative strategies that convey why your cabinets are beautiful.

This approach isn't for everybody. If you're a me-too company that's just hanging on, doing what everyone else is doing, don't bother building a brand. Keep showing beauty shots, keep touting selection and finish, and when business starts to decline, your company can decline along with it.

But those manufacturers that clearly differentiate themselves, their products and their services from the competition stand to realize greater margins, deeper channel loyalty, broader consumer recognition and better sell through than ever before. And that paints a picture of real beauty.

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