



BY KEVIN O'DONNELL

LEARN TO USE COMMUNICATION'S NEGATIVE SPACE

IN TODAY'S SUPER-CONNECTED world, just because marketers can reach their customers 24/7 and virtually everywhere they turn, does that mean they should?

Of course not, although that won't keep some from trying. In this kind of environment, success at building a brand—at solidifying and growing your relationship with customers—is really all about being selective. You need to pick the right time and place or, better yet, let the customer pick for you.

Perhaps marketers need to learn from artists and their ability to exploit negative space. Negative space is the unoccupied space between or around objects that artists use to create an effect. It's a subtle means to increase the appeal and interest of a composition, allowing viewers to make their own connections.

For marketers, leveraging that space means finding the unexpected yet relevant opportunities to interact with customers and underscore the appeal and role of the brand in their lives. It means letting customers help shape the brand and forge their own unique connections with it. It means creating the kinds of relationships that will benefit the customer and ultimately create material impact for the brand.

Here's a perfect example of this concept at work: At most bars and nightclubs, alcohol brands are part of the largely undifferentiated background—backlit signs, branded posters, banners and coasters. Miller Brewing Co., though, put that negative space to work with a banner on the Ecast platform, an out-of-home ad-serving network on digital jukeboxes in bars and clubs. By engaging customers while they selected music, rather than just being wallpaper, Miller was able to score an average brand recall of 43% for the spot. By any measure, that's impressive (never mind that

many bar-goers won't remember what they drank the previous night, much less what brands were advertised!).

Miller found an unusual way to show its relevance and reinforce its role in customers' lives. And I'd argue that, despite all the talk of "breaking through the clutter," that's the real issue marketers face today. Here are some key ways to address it:

- **First**, walk in your customers' (and non-customers') shoes. Too much effort is put into tracking studies, focus groups and concept tests designed to confirm or disprove what marketers believe they already know. They should try to gain insights into what they don't know. One national retailer gave all its senior executives (yes, middle-aged white guys) a simple role-playing assignment: "You're women gearing up for your high school reunion. Go into our stores and shop 'till you drop." The insights they gained from their sprees have had ramifications for everything from in-store design to employee training.

- **Second**, let your customers experience your brand in surprising but meaningful ways that underscore its role in their everyday lives. Charmin did just this by offering clean, upscale bathrooms, baby changing stations, stroller parking, seating areas and, naturally, lots of Charmin-branded toilet paper in New York's Times Square. Nearly 500,000 people from around the world visited the Charmin restrooms over last year's holiday season, gaining the brand considerable goodwill as well as top-of-mind presence via significant media coverage.

- **Next**, co-create with customers to enhance their ownership. Tapping into customers' passion and insights creates a win-win situation. Customers get to play a greater role in shaping the brands that

matter to them, and companies have an opportunity to deepen relationships with customers that will likely translate into future sales. LEGO hopes to do for robotics what the iPod did for music with its Mindstorms robotic invention system. It's getting there by closely collaborating with lead users who have been instrumental in developing enhanced features and capabilities. Their involvement strengthens their connection to and advocacy for the LEGO brand and generates media attention and, in this case, a host of awards.

- **Finally**, don't be afraid to sometimes let your customers lead the way. Lonely Planet, the publisher-turned-travel resource whose mission is to make travel accessible to everyone, has such devoted fans that the fans created their own MySpace page to spread the word. This page, with 11,000 guests, peacefully co-exists with Lonely Planet's own corporate presence there (with 2,000 guests), and speaks to the wisdom of allowing customers to both shape the brand and define what it means to them.

There's considerable debate in today's always-on world over what to do to connect with customers. The reality, though, is that the solution is fairly simple. Strategies must be anchored in the one thing that is within marketers' control: developing the deep and proprietary understanding of their customers that leads to the almost seamless integration of the brand in their world. **m**



Kevin O'Donnell is a senior partner of Prophet (www.prophet.com), a global brand and marketing consultancy with offices in Chicago, Hamburg, London, Madrid, New York, San Francisco,

Tokyo and Zurich. He can be reached at kodonnell@prophet.com or news@ama.org.