



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES

CONSUMER TARGETING AND BRAND EVANGELISM

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“Anyone who drinks beer.”

When asked to define their consumer target, more than one brewer has replied with a description that casts a very wide net – maybe not quite as wide as the above, but still pretty expansive. The intent is seemingly to avoid too much specificity. Many brewers, large and small, feel it's good strategy not to limit the group of people who will drink their brand.

Yet it's a general rule of marketing that the consumer target as described in the brand's strategy statement should be tightly focused. In fact, while it may seem like an oxymoron, it's true: the more narrowly you define your consumer target, the more successful your brand is likely to be.

The reason for the disconnect between theory and practice, it seems, stems from several commonplace misunderstandings, not only in terms of how brands grow, but in terms of the role of the defined consumer target in that growth.

To oversimplify (but not by too much), most beer brands grow by word of mouth, or social influence. That typically includes many big brands that also rely on advertising. Advertising can reinforce brand usage behavior, but exposure to an ad is less likely to be the impetus for a new drinker to try the brand than is social influence, i.e., current drinkers spreading the word to other drinkers: through overt and sometimes enthusiastic recommendations, by the branded merchandise they wear (along with the implied endorsement), or even by being observed drinking the beer by strangers looking for any kind of helpful cue in a bar with a crowded menu.

But the role of social influence goes beyond a one-time selection on a given occasion, People often adopt brands that become part of their regular buying habits, and this, too, is often driven by the influence of other people. In one consumer survey, beer drinkers were asked their reasons for adopting a brand of regularly-consumed beer in the first place. (They were asked to choose from an extensive list of possible reasons.) Overwhelmingly, the responses reflected social influence: 70% chose *People I know drank it*; 43% said *A friend recommended it*; 34% chose *It was an "in" brand*.

So if person-to-person influence is driving a brand's growth in a given month, one might rightly ask: how did that growth begin in the first place? Was there literally a "first drinker" of the brand, who plucked the first six-pack of the then-brand-new beer off the shelf moments after it arrived at the store – and then went on to influence the first round of new drinkers, who themselves went on to influence others in an ongoing process?

While the "first drinker" is essentially mythical, the fact is that the whole social diffusion model requires two types of drinkers: the majority of the brand's drinkers, who choose it because of the influence of others; and a smaller core of drinkers who in essence jump-start that process because they're personally drawn by the brand proposition itself: its image, personality, and values. (Of course, this is somewhat oversimplified for the sake of discussion.)

This latter group is (or should be) the brand's consumer target – those for whom all brand communication is designed, because they are (or will become) the brand's *evangelists*. Brand evangelists are people who relate so strongly to the brand that their enthusiasm will rub off on others, whether or not those others fully understand or embrace the entire brand proposition. And in order to create that kind of evangelism, the brand strategy should offer a pretty specific description of the target consumer – not necessarily in terms of demographics, but in terms of the attitudes and motivations of those consumers.

Thus, it's typically better to have a relatively small pool of "brand evangelists" than a larger pool of people who only feel "pretty good" about the brand, but not good enough to bother recommending it. Yet the latter situation is often what results when the consumer target is defined broadly.

Note that at least some of the people who start drinking the brand because of social influence will be enthusiastic enough to make recommendations themselves. They may or may not internalize the brand proposition to any significant degree; their enthusiasm is more a result of ongoing experience with the brand and its associations with good times.

This last point has interesting implications for consumer surveys of brand imagery among drinkers. If such a study only chronicles the results across the entire survey sample, the findings will likely mix apples and oranges. Some frequent drinkers may well be able to play back elements of the brand proposition in encouraging detail, while other equally frequent drinkers will report a positive but not clearly-defined image. The former group, clearly, represents the brand evangelists, while the latter may well be those who came to the brand through social influence. And so when the image among all frequent drinkers is tabulated, the latter group “waters down” the apparent image of the brand. A brewery may be able to learn a lot by categorizing each survey respondent and breaking out the results by evangelists versus other frequent drinkers.

More than a few successful brands will actually give their consumer target a name, like “Nick” or “Lydia,” and sketch out a portrait of that person. What is their life like? What do they do for a living? What do they do for fun, or to relax? What are their hopes, dreams, and fears – but, more pragmatically, what motivates them to get out of bed each morning? How does beer drinking fit into their daily life? What sort of emotional transition are they seeking to make when they drink beer?

No one real-world drinker will match every detail of the fictional Nick or Lydia. But filtering all ideas for brand communication through the lens of “How will Nick feel about this?” or “Why is this right for Lydia?” helps keep the brand relentlessly focused. This not only helps beer drinkers feel they know what the brand stands for, it gives them something to talk about when recommending the brand. And that’s the first step toward creating more brand evangelists.

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