

Beyond Mad Men: It's Time for Brand School

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ABSTRACT

This article calls on universities and trade associations to develop a new approach to marketing and brand education, one that replaces yesterday's methods with a strategy enlisting 21st century tools for connecting, communicating and even collaborating with internal and external audiences. As the author argues, it's time to say goodbye to expensive advertising campaigns and hello to blogging, tweeting and friending.

Introduction

Many of us are fans of the award-winning hit television show, *Mad Men*. Set in the 1960s, the weekly drama explores the lives and careers of several executives at Sterling-Cooper advertising agency. From the UK-based ownership group to the complex characters and sub-plots, the show provides a unique lens into what life was like inside—and outside—of the midcentury advertising agency.

Unfortunately, *Mad Men* isn't as much of a period piece as you might think. Fast forward fifty years and you'll find the same mindsets prevailing at a lot of advertising agencies. Just as discouraging, that thinking holds sway at plenty of our education establishments—think university marketing programs and associations offering professional development. Too many of them are still geared to training Mad Men, to advocating the Mad Men approach to brand development.

That's largely because the business world and many business schools are influenced by—and even staffed by—members of the Mad Men generation. And let's face it; the Mad Men approach to branding has its allure, its glamour. The high-dollar advertising campaigns and the pricey slogans are sexy, no doubt about it. But they are also increasingly irrelevant and out of touch with the realities of today's marketplace. It's time for academia and business to recognize that Mad Men branding rules are rapidly becoming obsolete.

To be sustainable in the 21st century, brand developers need to embrace a model based on mission, core values, stakeholder engagement and social media. This means that in higher education, old-school marketing programs that focus on advertising should be replaced by brand schools where connections are advanced and celebrated. At the same time, associations that serve communications and marketing professionals should also embrace the brand-school model, helping today's working professionals go beyond advertising to sustainable brand development.

Learning From the Mad Men

Before institutions transition away from their Mad Men programs toward a brand school, it would be wise to remember just what the Mad Men taught us. Their emphasis on advertising was right for the times, for the newspaper, magazine and television years. During those years, building name recognition and capturing audience attention was essential to the bottom line. And the Mad Men were savvy about research. They developed and deployed the focus group, the consumer survey, the direct-mail campaign. They understood that marketing decisions should be based on solid research and a deep understanding of the target audience.

Most important, the Mad Men knew the value of sustained communication. They believed—rightly—that customers needed ongoing reminders to buy Tang, drive Pontiacs and choose Jiff. As a result, the schools that educated Mad Men put a huge emphasis on target-audience research, creative messaging and advertising, advertising, advertising. What’s more, they applied this research to every venue at their disposal: print, radio, television and, in the later years, even the World Wide Web.

Today, rather than creating a culture of collaboration, the Mad Men advertising campaign reinforces static images and, just as alarming, it builds silos within the brand culture. Stakeholders feel left out of the process and wonder about the mission and core values. Inevitably, the budget office submits the campaign to a cost-benefit analysis and wonders how the expenditures ever got approved. The foot prints are traced back to the Mad Men.

Beyond Mad Men: Where Is the Brand School for the 21st Century?

Today’s marketplace calls for a new model—one that redefines the task at hand. Today’s marketplace calls for a brand school. At brand school, the emphasis will be less about advertising—far less about advertising—and more about developing sustainable brands based on mission and core values.

The curriculum at the brand school won’t look much like the curriculum in the marketing and communications departments that prevail today. These traditionally have focused on the Four Ps—product, place, price and promotion. The fourth P, alas, has also come to represent self-promotion, a driver behind many Mad Men strategies. As dapper Don Draper of the fictional Sterling-Cooper is often heard saying, “People love spending a lot of money on advertising.” And Mad Men love collecting the awards that acknowledge their creativity and cleverness.

Just as important, brand schools will emphasize the new communications venues. In other words, they will embrace social media and the various online communities that foster communication among like-minded individuals. If they don’t, they will find themselves out of step with their students and light years behind the marketplace. Consider: Most forward-thinking organizations are tapping into social networking sites such Digg, Facebook, Flickr, Linked-In, Twitter and TypePad. These resources are becoming primary communications channels for brand building.

Brand schools will prepare students to maximize the potential of blogs and tweets and social networking postings—all of which foster connections among individuals with common interests, concerns and core values. Just as important, they will teach the intricacies of search-engine optimization, of harnessing the Internet to communicate with the world beyond company headquarters. No question about it, these emerging media and technologies have the potential to build communities and in the process, to build brands. That's why the best brand schools will focus on how the new technologies and communications venues can cultivate a lively group of brand champions and, in the process, change the way an organization develops and sustains its business.

So where are these future-focused brand schools? Most of them, alas, appear to be outside the continental United States. A quick online review of the curricula at the nation's top business schools reveal a mindset mired in Mad Men priorities. Harvard's business school, for example, lists no courses in brand management. MIT's Sloan School of Management offers a lone branding course. The University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business offers one elective class in strategic brand management. Only Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin appear geared to the modern marketplace. The former houses the Center for Global Brand Leadership and Wisconsin has launched the Center for Brand and Product Management, which offers what, is reportedly the first MBA program focusing on brand management.

Things will change, if only because the current generation of students will demand it.

Brand Educators, Meet Your Students

The happy truth is that when it comes to branding, today's students are ready for new approaches. In some ways, they are better prepared than their professors to embrace the challenges of branding in the 21st century. That's not to say that they're smarter or better educated. But the members of Generation Y intuitively understand the brave new world that confronts us. It is, after all, a world they have helped to create.

In *Grown Up Digital*, author Don Tapscott argues that Generation Y is the most intelligent generation to date. That may or may not be true, but Generation Y certainly was the first to fully embrace social networking—in fact, many of these geeks created it. Facebook, for example, started off as an online community builder among college kids at a handful of U.S. universities. That site now attracts billions of friends and is valued as one of the world's top brands. *Fast Company* magazine just recognized Facebook as the most innovative company in the world.

It won't be long before Generation Y constitutes the primary target audience for most industries and businesses. And where can they be reached? Via Twitter. On Facebook. At Linked-In. As authors Kit Yarrow and Jayne O'Donnell remind us in *Gen Buy*, social networking is identity building on a global stage, and that's where Generation Y hangs out. And what messages resonate with them? Well, don't expect them to hum product jingles or repeat taglines. They prize authenticity. They prefer messages that are unfiltered by controlling entities. They can spot spin in an instant, and they don't like it.

They don't like spin when they enroll in school either. They wonder how a Mad Men agenda of slogans and expensive advertising campaigns relates to real people. They want to know how to maximize the tools, most of them free or inexpensive, at their fingertips—the mobile technology, the blogs, the social-networking venues. They want to know how to work with 21st century marketing budgets, which, thanks to a new economic reality, don't have nearly the number of digits that characterized 20th century Mad Men budgets. In the near future they will expect brand schools to educate them. It's as simple as that.

Conclusion: Bid the Mad Men Farewell and Say Hello to a New Approach

In a few years, it's likely that we'll look back on Mad Men strategies for branding with the same nostalgia we hold for drive-in movies and tail-fin cars. Mad Men strategies will still play a role in brand development, but their role will be relegated to the back burner. That's because billboards and print ads and television commercials are less and less important, not to mention cost effective, in today's global community.

College and university marketing programs, as well as professional marketing and communications associations must adjust to the changing reality; the best will develop majors, concentrations and member benefits focused on sustainable brand development. They'll celebrate the glory days of the Mad Men, but they won't seek to replicate them. After all, that was then. This is now.

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