

Association Marketing

There is a marketing tactic that can be extremely useful in helping people understand and connect to a product or service by providing them with the points of reference they need to feel closer to the product. Tudog calls this “association marketing” and it is designed to create an immediate relationship between the consumer and the product.

While not the most sophisticated of marketing techniques, association marketing can be highly effective. The basic idea is to find a logical link between something that is current, popular, and relevant and link your product to it. The association created between your product and the item will generate awareness, create a positive image, and drive sales.

One of the more popular executions of association marketing is through current fads. The temptation to use a recent popular craze is understandable, and yet there are a number of serious downsides one should consider. For example, during the Beanie Babies craze many companies tried in a number of ways to somehow associate themselves with the highly popular stuffed animals. Some companies tried to imitate the products. Others offered promotional give-away of beanie babies. Where the association made sense, the public accepted it and to some extent embraced the associated products. When the attempt to make the connection was too apparent and did not fit, the consumer public saw it for what it was – a stretch and an attempt to ride on the beanie babies’ bandwagon. Typically these contrived efforts were rejected.

Another effort can revolve around current events. These attempts can be controversial, which draws attention and raises awareness, but may have the double edged sword of angering people and turning off potential customers. The idea here is that you somehow associate some aspect of your product to a political event taking place. The most recent examples have been attempts by all sorts of companies to draw in the war in Iraq by either mentioning our soldiers fighting over there, or mentioning the current war on terror (or the terror threat). These efforts often appear forced (because they are) and leave the consumer wondering what the exact connection is between the soldiers fighting in Iraq and the product being promoted. Often in these cases the disingenuous association causes a spontaneous backlash and people become angry at the promoting company. For these reasons the use of current events and politics are to be undertaken with taste, tact, and extreme caution.

Yet a third association tactic focuses on famous (and infamous) figures. Beyond the obvious celebrity endorsements, there are often efforts to mimic the style of a celebrity, or even use look-alike models to promote products. These efforts may prove successful within certain target markets, such as the teen and young adult markets. The caution here is to avoid association with a celebrity that might prove to be too racy or inappropriate for your products. Recently Slim Fast had to release actor/comedian Whopie Goldberg as their spokesman when she made off color references about President Bush’s last name while performing at a Democratic fundraising event. Ironically, prior to the incident, Whopie’s comic approach to Slim Fast’s weight loss products (her tagline was “I’m a Loser”) was an excellent example of a positive association.

Association marketing serves to accelerate the time to market penetration by gaining consumer attention through a created relationship with someone or something that already has consumer attention. As discussed, there are significant pitfalls to deploying

this tactic and these risks need to be evaluated, understood and weighed prior to launching an associated marketing campaign.