

Account Specific Business Marketing: *Training for Survival*

By Bob Monaghan

There are three truths you should know about Account Specific Business Marketing:

1. It's a prerequisite for survival in the consumer packaged goods industry today.
2. Your competitors are doing it and your customers expect you to be on board.
3. It means more than just retraining your sales force. Account Specific Business Marketing means rethinking and refocusing every aspect of your business operations. And if that makes you think twice about reading further, please see points 1 and 2 above.

For the consumer packaged goods industry, Account Specific Business Marketing (ASBM) is a vital component of the success equation these days. ASBM is about integrating account-specific thinking into your business culture, and making it part of every aspect of your operations, from the boardroom to the backroom. It's more than simply another training program. Here, training is put in place to support a change in the way you go to market. You can't just train your sales people in ASBM without the concurrent reeducation and commitment of the entire company to this new approach to your business. That would be like training your staff to fly F-15s and then sending them out in twin-engine props—a monumental waste of time, money, and effort.

To be sure, ASBM is not a new idea—industrial companies have been employing ASBM tactics for years. But the consumer packaged goods industry is playing catch up with what other industries have long known: successful marketing means recognizing your customers' needs and meeting those by providing your product or service in a way that builds business for that customer. Sounds straightforward, but it is easier said than done. In today's business climate,

the traditional consumer packaged goods manufacturer needs the retailer to effectively reach the consumer. To achieve that means rethinking the old ways of doing things.

Understanding ASBM

The cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach to sales will no longer work in today's market. Your customers are facing an increasingly diversified consumer market that demands specialized marketing and promotional efforts. Retailers have radically changed the way they market to the consumer. They've fielded studies to evaluate consumer needs, preferences, concerns, desires, motivations – and, in response, have created dynamic alternatives to traditional retail formats and merchandising approaches to capitalize on these consumer needs. The result? The retailer is more directly involved in the consumer marketing mix, and this involvement is complicated by the desire of most retailers for differentiation from the competition.

This dynamic type of marketing by retailers demands a full measure of support from you, the manufacturer. ASBM requires a strong working relationship between the manufacturer and the retailer. This relationship recognizes the sales goals and marketing efforts of both companies. ASBM focuses on developing unified marketing strategies that benefit both your bottom line and the account's. Don't assume that ASBM means making your customer wealthy at the expense of your profits. To work over the long haul, this must be a joint effort for mutual benefit.

Knowledge is power

The first step in creating an ASBM relationship is to understand your business. The second step is to understand your customer's business.

Understanding your company means:

- Learning how various company functions contribute to value-added products, services, and programs.
- Learning and contributing to the work processes that lead to sales and marketing goals.
- Recognizing the challenges that your business faces in bringing your products to market.
- Learning about the specific issues, which affect how well your company can service a particular account by leveraging your value-added products, services, and programs.

Understanding your accounts means:

1. Complete, up-to-date account profiles...
 - Names, locations, addresses of key decision-makers and influencers
 - Descriptions of how they buy and sell products and programs
 - Locations and descriptions of stores
 - Plan-o-grams for your product categories
 - Their volume history for your company's products
 - Who they view as their current and potential customers
 - How they define their marketplace
 - Key operating policies
2. Understanding how they go to market...
 - Research how your account markets itself. Do they have a marketing strategy or plan? Are they seeking a leadership image in price, in selection and service, or in a hybrid of these two?
 - What are they doing to attract and hold customers?
 - Who's their competition and how does the account stack up?
 - How do their stores reflect their market strategies?

Only by thoroughly understanding these factors can you begin to tailor your business program to meet the account's specific needs.

3. Knowing how you measure up...

How does the account perceive your company:

- in terms of product quality, pricing, merchandising and value-added services?
- in terms of promotional and advertising programs?
- in terms of contribution to their business growth?

How does the account measure success?

- What financial measures are most important to them?
- How does the account measure the productivity of its operations at the warehouse, at retail, overall?

4. Hitting the right pressure points...

- What are the hot issues for the account?
- What's the big problem of the day? What do they see looming large in their future?
- What are they doing about it?

Ideally, the account should have a counterpart to the manufacturer's account manager. As the relationship grows, the manufacturer and the retailer may begin to share information systems as well, including hardware and software, for better communication and economy.

Changing the focus

Conceptually, Account Specific Business Marketing is rather simple: understand the need and fill it. But this approach requires a fundamental change in focus for most consumer products companies, a change from the narrow focus on internal brand goals to a broader focus that considers the account's business situation as well. As a result, you may need to modify existing programs to be more flexible, allowing them to be custom-tailored to meet different account situations. One of the obvious changes that this implies is that your field sales force must have more autonomy, more freedom, and more authority. Responsibilities that are typically the domain of other departments or disciplines—the brand groups, for example—may have to be shared or transferred to the field. By doing so, however, you're asking people to take on

responsibilities they may not be ready for—or to relinquish those they may not be willing to give up. This is where training comes in.

The effective Account Business Manager must understand how to do more than just "sell."

He or she must be effective in:

- account penetration and development
- management of internal resources
- market planning with accounts
- implementing programs across organizational boundaries internally and at the account
- category management
- trade marketing
- in-store marketing

Greater sophistication and a different skill set is required in:

- forecasting
- team dynamics
- information analysis and interpretation
- strategic planning
- category expertise
- local presence marketing
- personal and team communication
- presentation of business proposals and plans
- negotiation
- problem analysis and decision-making
- consumer marketing

Transforming knowledge into behavior

Training is the link that turns knowledge into behavior. Account Specific Business Marketing is too complex and too powerful a marketing tool to send your sales force out with inadequate, or worse, no training. The difficulty facing many consumer-packaged goods companies is the lack of training specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of this group. Just as Account Specific Business Marketing is based on understanding and meeting the unique needs of your accounts, so too should the sales training program grow out of an intrinsic understanding of your

company's culture, organization, needs, problems, and potential.