

Raising Promotion's Idea Bar

The promotion business is known for a lot of things, but originality is not one of them.

by **Steve Rotterdam**
Chief Creative Officer
EastWest Creative

At first glance, it would appear that most marketers think promotions and creativity don't even belong in the same sentence.

A resounding 77 percent of the 325 respondents to a *Reveries* survey said that most promotions are not based on new ideas. Just two percent said promotions are known for their "creativity."

This one-two punch lands hard. Marketing—regardless of discipline—is supposed to be a business of new ideas and creativity. That promotion appears to be the white elephant in the marketing family is inherently disturbing. Even more troubling is the rigid thinking that appears to gird the prevailing outlook.

Promotions, offered one respondent, "should be based on objectives." Absolutely. No argument there. But does that mean they can't also be creative? Of course not, but one gets the sense that many—if not most of our respondents—are perhaps a little too comfortable in the belief that new ideas and creativity are all but irrelevant to promotional success.

A similar sort of rigormortis set in around our question about media. It was not surprising that the internet topped

the list of favorite media for promotions (25 percent), followed by in-store (22 percent), with mass media (17 percent) trailing.

Again, the accompanying comments revealed a certain lack of imagination about the potential of media to inspire new ideas and creativity in promotion: "Media don't create ideas; they serve them," said one respondent. "New promotional ideas won't come from media—they'll come from new concepts," echoed another.

Well, then, what about Starbucks? The Starbucks brand is really just one big promotion, and it was the result of a fresh perspective on the potential of retail stores as a medium for marketing—promotional and otherwise. The notion that media amount to little more than empty vessels for promotional messages could help explain why there is so little creativity in this business.

The outlook turned a little bit lighter, if not brighter, with our open-ended questions. Many of the responses showed that promotion people at least have good senses of humor! Ideation devices mentioned by our respondents included: caffeine, →

Are most promotions based on new ideas?

Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage
Yes	41	13%
No	250	77%
Don't know	10	3%
Other	24	7%
		325

1. Provoke Consumers.

Years ago, Taco Bell did a promotion that remains one of the best examples of how a simple promotional offer can provoke consumers to invest more than the 20 seconds it takes to zip-clip coupons out of their Sunday papers. It was a promotion for Star Wars featuring heat-sensitive promotion pieces. The instructions were to peel a game piece off a cup and hold it to your forehead to reveal whether you had won a prize.

Reality was, the prize could be revealed by holding the game piece in your hand. But consumers played along. You saw people walking out of Taco Bells with game pieces stuck on their foreheads! It was fun, benign—and simple. It worked because it provoked consumers to become involved in the brand—in this case a little bit of harmless insanity.

2. Rivet Retailers.

In the old days, it was possible to get retailer support by plying the buyer with a cool, leather jacket. However, riveting retailers requires so much more than leather (or lace) these days. Most of all it requires listening—and responding to—retailers.

The dialogue should transcend making a sale to include building a relationship. For example, promotions are often flagged right on the packages. Problem is, when the promotional period ends, the outdated packages remain on the shelves. This frustrates the consumer and makes the retailer, well, look stupid. The brand looks pretty irrelevant, too.

3. Forge Alliances.

Why did Baskin-Robbins make “Shrek” sundaes? That strategic alliance was so obvious we don’t even need to bother explaining it here. To ensure that the potential of strategic alliances is maximized, it is essential that the brand team remains abreast of new opportunities for alliances

and maintains an active dialogue about the possibilities.

Truly forward-thinking organizations proactively research and catalog opportunities. This involves a daily review of all news and information sources and then compiling the intelligence into a searchable database of strategic alliance opportunities.

4. Embrace Technology.

That the best promotional ideas require open communications goes without saying. The broad acceptance of email as a communications vehicle certainly has helped improve the kind of “multilogue” that’s so essential to the creative process.

All the advertising, promotions, direct and public relations can be digitized and stored online for ready access by those charged with making sure it all lines up and adds up. Such an environment also sets up the potential for greater cross-pollination—bigger and better ideas—not only in promotion but also between all of the disciplines.

5. Explore Media.

The marketing mix for promotions has changed dramatically; the balance of marketing power has migrated from a finite media set to vehicles that reach consumers at myriad “touch-points”—at-home, in-store, and elsewhere. Ideas in promotion are often only as big as the media selected to convey them.

At-Home. This cultural change in the consumption of media to a more active mode is tailor-made for promotions. After all, promotion is all about participation! The rise of participatory media suggests a whole new array of ways to involve consumers in brands and motivate them to purchases.

In-Store. Retail is not just for distribution anymore; stores are marketing me-

dia in their own right.

The ability of marketing programs through retail channels to accelerate business growth is easily explained. Retail stores simultaneously carry marketing messages and complete sales transactions. Few other media can claim so large a role in both marketing and sales.

Elsewhere. Satellite technology is driving real-time communications to consumers via elevators, ATMs, taxicabs and sports arenas. Cellphones-as-media is just beginning to be explored. And, of course, good old-fashioned person-to-person marketing (whether in the store, on the street, at the stadium, in the bar or at the beach) is a powerful pathway to fresh—and effective—ideas.

6. Think Simple.

In promotion, as is true so often in life, the simplest ideas are usually the best ideas. Consumers see it, get it, appreciate it, and buy into it. Think about some of the truly great, all-time promotions. The Pepsi Challenge. McDonald’s Happy-Meals. Frequent-Flyer Miles. Cracker-Jack prizes and Bazooka-Joe comics. So powerful are these promotional ideas—simple that they are—they often become part of the permanent equity of the brand.

The big idea can be as simple as a sticker on a package. The challenge is—what do you do with a sticker to make it provoke consumers, stop them, and engage them in the brand? There are so many things you could do. Unmask Batman. Solve the murder. Crack the code. Find the pony. Don’t get us started!



Are promotions best known for:

Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage
Building brand image/equity	71	22%
Coupons	16	5%
Creativity	5	2%
Eroding brand image/equity	3	1%
Increasing sales	144	44%
Changing consumer behavior	36	11%
Trinkets and trash	37	11%
Other	15	5%
	327	

← tequila, a crystal ball, sleep deprivation, magic mushrooms, the shower, sushi and “large craniums.”

Thirty-three percent of respondents specifically mentioned “brainstorming” as the primary way in which promotion ideas are developed. However, many acknowledged that they don’t follow a specific process and rely more on past experiences or even their intuitions for guidance. Many respondents readily admitted to re-hashing or re-constituting old ideas, either their own or those of others.

Perhaps most encouraging of all, more than 200 of the 325 respondents picked “favorite” promotions, and the range of responses belied the premise that promotion isn’t creative. We had mentions of everything from the S&H Green Stamps redemption program and the secret decoder rings of the ‘50s, to the more recent “I Found Your Wallet” promotion, where one of the wallets in question was Warren Buffett’s.

Of “favorite” promotions cited, “The Guinness Win Your Own Pub” promotion

received the most mentions, followed by The Barq’s “Soviet Union Going out of Business Sale,” M&M Color of M&Ms promotion, the Pepsi Challenge, and McDonald’s Monopoly. Airline frequent flyer promotions were mentioned as admired loyalty programs, however no retailer frequent shopper programs received specific mention.

The dogma that business objectives and creativity are somehow mutually exclusive needs major revision. Some of the all-time great promotions—the Pepsi Challenge and, more recently, the blue M&M’s promotion—were just as creative as they were business-building.

Rubbing your tummy while patting your head may not be easy to do, but it sure would help put an end to all of the “monkey-see, monkey-do” in the promotion business today. Those who venture along will realize significant competitive advantages for their brands:

Integration. Brands that invest as much in promotional ideas as they do in

advertising, direct and public relations ideas are far better positioned to deliver against the promise of integrated marketing communications.

Collaboration. When promotional ideation is extended to include the retail trade, the result is closer relationships between brands and retailers. The payoff is a far more effective brand presence in the retail environment, where ultimately purchase decisions are made. Similarly, collaboration between alliance partners fosters ideas that usually are bigger than any partner could have realized on its own.

Motivation. While getting consumers to do something has always been central to promotions, a stronger emphasis on ideas multiplies the effect. Not only do consumers stop and take action, the overall experience is richer and therefore more lasting. The promotion not only motivates the sale, it also builds the brand’s image and equity.

When ideas replace tactics as the driving force of promotion marketing, the results often transcend the stated objectives. Yes, the promotion delivers everything it was supposed to deliver—but it also delivers something extra.

That “something extra” might be an enhanced image. It might be a closer relationship with key retail accounts. It might be a more engaged consumer. We call that “something extra” the success dividend, and it is the true bottom line of accountability in marketing. ■

Steve Rotterdam is Chief Creative Officer of **EastWest Creative**, www.ewcreative.com, a New York City-based promotion marketing agency, whose clients include Applebee’s, Discovery Kids, Kobrand, Kraft Foods, Labatt Breweries, Lego, Reckitt Benckiser, Universal Studios and Warner Brothers. Steve can be reached at srotterdam@ewcreative.com



A Q&A on *creativity* with Nike's Bryan Finke

Be a
Sponge

How does Nike encourage creativity?

Nike was founded on creativity. The company began as a group of runners who set out to create better running shoes. They talked to other runners, got feedback, translated that into performance innovation and delivered that to the marketplace. It's what we're still doing today.

The culture of this place is heavily built on that kind of fundamental process—get out, be a sponge, gain insight, translate that into innovation in everything you do.

We actually have a maxim here—be a sponge. One of the things that every Nike employee is challenged to do is to learn—to spend time talking to consumers, traveling to different places, gaining new experience and, as I said, learning and gaining insights.

It's amazing to watch some of the product designers and product developers go out to the marketplace and just sit down and start talking to athletes and gather insights. It's amazing to see that—season after season—creative performance innovation in products that you didn't expect.

That spreads throughout the whole company, regardless of whether it's product development or marketing communications. We're constantly trying to discover new things and come up with new and better ideas and products.

How do new media give rise to new creative approaches?

It is a very exciting time for the world of digital marketing. But new media—whether it is digital or utilizing books, DVDs, or different kinds of media—are absolutely going to create new forms of communication and marketing, and really challenge companies like Nike to come up with new, creative approaches to reach and inspire consumers.

If you had to make a choice between building a database or launching a mass media campaign, which would you pick and why?

That depends on the objective. If you were driven to use a database, you'd still need outstanding creative to connect and inspire consumers. Typically at Nike, we lean towards the creative side. Even when we choose to implement tactical tools like database marketing, we're still placing a very heavy burden on the creative.

Which brands today use creativity to greatest competitive advantage in their marketing programs, and why?

The brands that use creativity to the greatest competitive advantage today are the ones that are able to do so in a way that is relevant to their consumers. Apple is a great



example of a brand that not only delivers creative products and communication, but that also is able to do so in a way that is broadly accessible and relevant to consumers.

I also think that the functional experience associated with brands is becoming more and more important and is creating new opportunities for brands like Google and Tivo to be seen as creative and valuable. By functional experience I mean the extent to which the brand becomes part of a consumer's life and has greater relevance to them.

I'm also impressed with artists and musicians like U2 or Madonna who have reinvented or evolved themselves many times while managing to stay creative and connected to their consumer bases. They're using creativity in a very connected way.

How do you make sure creativity pays off at Nike?

If we continue to listen, make better solutions and tell our stories, our creativity will pay off.

Bryan Finke leads Business Strategy for Nike U.S.A.'s Global Content & Partnerships team. In this role, he is guiding Nike's strategy in the gaming space and in digital content distribution via broadband, mobile devices and video on demand. He is also engaged in original programming and publishing projects in the areas of film and print publications.

Bryan previously served as director of digital brand marketing for Nike, with responsibility for websites, online advertising, e-mail communications, instant messaging, mobile marketing and game integration. The group's interactive work has been recognized with more than 100 awards. Bryan began working with Nike in 1996 as a consultant on the company's first consumer website project developed for the Atlanta Olympic Games.