

STRATEGIES

APRIL 28/MAY 4, 2000

THE BUSINESS JOURNAL 17

DID YOU GET MY MESSAGE?

To find the answer, companies conduct 'audits' of their marketing programs

By MYA M. BORGER

The Alpharetta Convention and Visitors Bureau was a brand spanning new organization when it hired a consultant to review its marketing materials to develop a communications strategy.

"I felt a need to bring in a big gun," said DeSales Wagster, president of the Georgia bureau. "I didn't want to miss any opportunities."

Wagster hired Tarleton Adams, president of the Adams Advisory Group in Jacksonville, to conduct what Adams calls "asset mapping" — and others call "communications audits."

Asset mapping and communications audits are two of many terms public relations professionals use to describe a process that basically boils down to this: a review of a company's marketing materials and key messages.

Communications experts say it's important for companies to have a cohesive message throughout their marketing materials, mission statements and even voice-mail messages.

"It all comes down to communicating effectively," said Rebecca Hart, an independent PR consultant. "You can have great products and services, but if you don't reach your target audiences, it's not going to work."

From receptionist to CEO

In trying to determine how effectively a company is getting its message across, Adams always starts by asking the receptionist to describe what the company does — and usually does not get a clear response.

"She is the first person you see," Adams said. "That person has to know what the company does, and if they don't know, that begins the process of miscommunications."

Adams then interviews the CEO or president. "The person at the top has to buy into the process."

Next, she talks with the communications and marketing people to review the company's brochures, letterhead and other communications materials.

Adams also studies the company's history, markets and audiences.

She pulls all of her research together in communications strategy. But her job isn't done there. She works with the company to make sure employees get the message.

"I will train the administrative staff and the key spokespersons to make sure they understand what they need to be saying about their compa-

ny," Adams said.

For Wagster, Adams found opportunities the visitors bureau's staff overlooked.

"We would have headed in the wrong direction," Wagster said.

The visitors bureau had been taking aim at only social organizations and family reunions. But Adams found the bureau was missing two potential markets. She set up a program for the bureau to go after visitors interested in sports and nature.

Adams "found the missing pieces, and we are seeing rapid growth," Wagster said.

Finding the target

Hart believes all companies, large or small, should go through the reviews regularly to see if communications failures are hurting them.

Hart's review is a four-step process: planning, research, implementation and evaluation.

"Most businesses want to start at the third step and jump into implementing," Hart said. "They think they already know their audience and target market."

But as Ann Sabbag, president of Health Designs in Ponte Vedra Beach, discovered, a business may have misidentified its target market.

Health Designs, formed to conduct health screenings at corporate clients' offices and at health fairs, "had always been targeting the human resources, insurance providers and benefits manager," Sabbag said.

Hart helped Health Designs better identify its potential market and tailor its message more effectively.

Although the focus is still on corporate work-site health promotion, Health Designs also gives health screenings to individuals out of its own office and is doing screenings and at Ponte Vedra health clubs.

Before working with Hart, the 5-year-old company never had an advertising and marketing plan. Sabbag just advertised a little and hung flyers when needed.

"It was a shoot and miss strategy," she said. "I was looking for a fine-tuned strategic plan because our internal resources were maxed."

Sabbag, however, was skeptical about hiring an outside person to review her company. "I heard it was very expensive."

But Sabbag found that Hart charged fees she could afford. She spent a few thousand dollars on the plan.

Public relations professionals can be hired on a



PHOTO BY OSCAR SOSA

Ann Sabbag of Health Designs hired a PR consultant to help her health-screening company get more clients by expanding its marketing efforts.

hourly or retainer basis to develop communications plans. The average hourly rates range from \$50 to \$120. The retainer rate is based on the expected number of hours the consultant plans to spend on the account each month, multiplied by the hourly rate.

"The real cost of the communications plan is not necessarily in the development of it," Sabbag said. "It's in the implementation of it. I now have to buy advertising, advertorials and create a newsletter for my clients."

The do-it-yourself model

Although a consultant can help a business see its communications strategy from different perspective, companies can do the reviews themselves, Hart said, but they need to identify and solidify their target audiences.

"Then talk to your clients to find out what information they need to make a decision on what your business is offering," she said.

Hart also suggested all the executives lay out every marketing and communication piece. "Look at those pieces from the perspective of your target audiences."

Next, develop a plan based on what the clients said and what was learned looking at the materials.

The communications audit generally takes four to six weeks, and Hart suggests companies re-evaluate the communications plan every six months.

Reprinted with the permission of *The Business Journal*