How Grasshoppers Helped Rebrand My Company, and Other Marketing Tales and Triumphs

Alumni discuss the MARKETING CHALLENGES they’ve faced and their SMART STRATEGIES for solving them.
THE STRATEGY: Think quirky and tell the noisemakers.
Building your company isn’t easy if people can’t spell its name.
That’s the problem GotVMail faced. Large chunks of the company’s radio ads were wasted spelling its URL address, and GotVMail owned a number of URLs with varied spellings because so many customers mixed it up.

On top of that, the Needham company had outgrown its name. Two undergraduates, David Hauser ’04 and Siamak Taghaddos ’03, founded GotVMail in 2003 as a provider of virtual phone systems. But as time went on, the pair envisioned the company as something grander, as a place offering a suite of products for entrepreneurs. Finally, after discussing a name change seemingly every year, they pulled the trigger in 2009. “We’re not IBM,” Hauser said. “We can change it.”

The new name is Grasshopper, and to spread the word about the moniker, the company compiled a list of 5,000 influential people: senators and congressmen, bloggers and reporters, authors and notable Twitter users. It then sent them each, via FedEx so the package would slip past gatekeepers, a chocolate-covered grasshopper. The package offered nothing in the way of explanation, save for a URL that took viewers to a video on entrepreneurship.

“The reaction was great,” Hauser says. The stunt was all over Twitter, and people posted videos of themselves eating the insects. To date, the company’s entrepreneurship video has been viewed more than 700,000 times, and the new name allows for shorter radio ads, an end to domain misspellings, and better word-of-mouth referrals. “[The name change] did everything we wanted it to do,” Hauser says. As for the chocolate-covered grasshoppers? He says they tasted “crunchy.”

How do you find customers for your new product?

THE STRATEGY: Persuade them to try it.
In April 2010, Sara Gragnolati, MBA ’10, launched an all-natural and gluten-free food company, Cocomama, and it released its first product, Quinoa Cereal, this past March. Now the Cambridge, Mass.-based business needs customers. Once they try it, Gragnolati believes, they’ll be hooked.

To achieve this goal, she’s pondering working with group-buying sites that focus on health, sustainability, or gluten-free foods. These sites can be effective in letting people sample a product, but that exposure comes at the cost of your profit. “It’s a great marketing value if we can break even,” says Gragnolati, Cocomama’s founder and CEO. To make sure participants remain customers, she may include a coupon in their deliveries. “I don’t count them as converted customers until they buy it again,” she says.

Gragnolati says her food has two distinct audiences: those who search out healthy food by choice, and gluten-free and allergy-sensitive customers who have no alternative. Reaching this latter group can be difficult given that they don’t necessarily want to try new things. “There are a lot of people who just want a gluten-free Oreo,” she says.

To connect with these unadventurous eaters, Gragnolati is establishing relationships with dieticians and health coaches, who typically are looking for products to recommend to clients. To make sure these relationships are worthwhile, Cocomama will focus on the quality of the connection rather than quantity. The company doesn’t want to hand out samples indiscriminately to dozens upon dozens of dieticians and hope they talk about the product with clients. “If the product just sits there, what good is it?” Gragnolati says.

How do you sell a $200 can of paint?

THE STRATEGY: Emphasize what’s different.
IdeaPaint allows any surface to become a dry-erase board. An intriguing idea, but at about $200 a can, it also seems pricey.

When talking about IdeaPaint, though, those at the Ashland, Mass., company don’t frame the product as just another can of paint. “Compared to paint, that’s expensive,” says John Goscha ’06, IdeaPaint’s founder, who first started working on the company with friends while living in E-Tower. “Compared to whiteboard, it’s not.” One Alaska school district, for instance, saved about $1 million by painting over their old chalkboards with IdeaPaint rather than replacing them with whiteboards.

This competition with a long-established product is not the sole focus of IdeaPaint’s messaging. The company aims for something larger. “We’re about changing the way people work,” says Morgen Newman ’06, vice president of international sales. Customers have painted IdeaPaint on all sorts of
surfaces, including classroom desks, dorm room doors, bathroom stalls, boat consoles, and mannequins. Wherever the product goes, it can encourage collaboration and imagination. “We’re selling dynamic environments,” says Jeff Avallon ’06, vice president of business development.

IdeaPaint gives away lots of samples. “It’s a product you need to try out,” Goscha says, and when people try it out, they invariably show it off. They talk about it. “We really focused on word of mouth initially,” Avallon says. The company also targeted forward thinkers such as architects and interior designers. “These people are designing the spaces of the future,” Avallon says. All of these efforts have paid off. The paint has been installed in more than 50,000 commercial locations, and this spring, Lowe’s began offering it in some 1,700 stores.

How can your business survive in a waning industry?

**THE STRATEGY: Retool its image and its focus.**

Christopher Long ’10 initially didn’t plan on joining his family’s printing business, Long Forms Inc., which his grandfather founded in 1962. But when his father passed away in 2009, leaving the Warminster, Pa., company without a leader, Long changed his mind.

What the new president took over was a company falling behind the times. It mainly focused on printing forms for businesses, but with the ubiquity of the Internet, not to mention the inclination of many companies to go green and avoid printing altogether, that market was drying up. “It’s almost a thing of the past,” Long says.

Action was needed. The first thing on Long’s agenda was changing the company’s decades-old name to LongEffect, removing the outdated “Forms.” He made sure to communicate the change to the company’s remaining print customers, many of whom are community bankers who had been friendly with his late father. “It was a good opportunity to introduce myself,” Long says. “Our clients were very receptive.”

He then went about expanding what the company offers. In addition to printing, LongEffect is now in the business of what Long calls “brand implementation.” It creates cross-media marketing campaigns for companies and provides branded materials and promotional products. To better promote these new services, Long launched a company website, something his father, who built a customer base by the sheer power of his personality, never relied on. Taken together, these moves better position the company for survival in a rapidly changing industry, Long says.

How do you attract tourists to an unfamiliar destination?

**THE STRATEGY: Try something unusual.**

Full of white sand beaches, secluded coves, and lush forest, San Vicente is a pretty place. The Filipino town’s remoteness makes for poor cell phone reception, but it also enables life to feel less stressful. “When I’m here, I feel I have so much freedom,” says Carmela Alvarez ’10, San Vicente’s mayor, who last year at 22 became the second youngest mayor ever elected in the Philippines. She spent much of her senior year at Babson traveling back and forth to San Vicente to campaign.

San Vicente may be pretty, but it’s also poor. Eighty percent of its 30,000 residents live below the poverty line. To inject life into the economy, Alvarez wants to turn San Vicente into a tourist destination, though with a twist. She wants tourists who will come as volunteers, perhaps as part of service trips sponsored by their employers. She calls this “voluntourism,” and by partnering with a Habitat for Humanity-style organization in the Philippines, she hopes to build 3,000 homes in the town. “I want to attract a different kind of tourist,” she says.

One critical issue stands in the way of this grand plan: San Vicente’s lack of recognition. That doesn’t deter Alvarez. “I think you have to be creative,” she says. Her solution is to start a reality TV show that focuses on the residents and her job as mayor. “It’s building the town as a brand, as a destination,” Alvarez says. The show already has started filming, and she’s hoping a cable outlet such as Discovery Channel will pick it up.

Inspired by famous city nicknames, such as San Fran and the Big Apple, Alvarez named the show San Vic after the new nickname she gave to her town. She thinks it’s easier to say and remember than the frequently mispronounced San Vicente (Ve-sen-tee is the proper pronunciation). “People butcher it a million ways,” she says.