



BY LEN CERONE

AS I LISTENED TO THE SALESPERSON AT MY local specialty fitness store go on passionately about the inner workings of steppers, my mind began to drift. The sales argument seemed reasonable enough: “This machine has all the same features as the more expensive name brand, and there are fewer parts in here to wear out,” the salesperson told me. “And, look here,” he added, now leaning slightly forward and pointing to some gears under the shroud, “this is the same company that private labels machines for all the gyms. This machine is gym quality.”

“Great,” I thought. “The stuff at the gym must be the best...um...I guess.” There was only one problem: I had no clue who made the gym machines, the names meant nothing to me, and they certainly didn’t scream quality, or not, because of a name. You see, I had no reference, no history and no relationship that had built my trust and confidence to make me want to buy that one piece.

In the end, I was confused, suspicious and suffering just a bit from sales fatigue, so I left the store ... without making a purchase.

BRANDING AND AWARENESS: CONDITIONING FOR THE SALE

For me and for thousands of consumers, this sales process was all wrong. Though I’ve used fitness equipment for years, worked with numerous personal trainers, and read as many exercise articles as Arnold Schwarzenegger has likely done curls, I really didn’t know squat about the world of equipment beyond adjusting the seat and resistance. What had I done wrong?

Or had I? Maybe the fitness industry has never acquainted itself with me?

Create consumer brand awareness to **CULTIVATE** customer loyalty and ensure continuing sales success.

Think about it, we all buy cars, but very few of us know the difference between transmissions and camshafts—nor do we really care. Ford, Volvo and even Rolls Royce know that we buy cars for many, many reasons, and those companies spend millions each year to make sure we know what their brand name stands for. We’ve been conditioned to know through brand communications that Volvo means safety, Ford means durability, and Rolls Royce means, yes, ultimate luxury. So when we finally do visit the showroom, we don’t need selling on those brands. We trust them to deliver. Give us the right color and the right feel, and we’re ready to believe. In fact, we want to believe. It is this trust and this belief that helps us to buy.

STRONG BRANDS SELL MORE

Quick: Name the No. 1 fast food company? No. 1 in soft drinks? How about software? Easy, yes? But why do people buy McDonald’s, Coca-Cola or Microsoft? Because, bottom line, people buy from companies they trust. There’s a saying among salespeople that illustrates the advantage of strong, trusted brands in the marketplace: “No one ever got fired for buying IBM.” Why?

“ In the end, all the features in the world cannot compete with trust in a brand. ”

Because IBM, the oldest, most respected name in computing, is the trusted choice, the safe choice. There have been many times rival salespeople have lost to IBM even though they offered better product, more features and even better terms. But, the trust wasn't there.

So how can a company with a better product and a sweeter offer lose? Because selling on product features and benefits alone is not enough, especially in the fitness arena. Consumers buy fitness equipment for reasons they may never articulate: For some, it's the promise of a "new me;" for others, it's attaining a higher level of performance; and others don't want to die young like their Dad or Mom did (and they won't tell you that). Even in the case of business-to-business sales, it's much more than features and benefits. Physical therapists may be motivated by the promise to help heal. A gym must trust that its investment is protected, and that the members will feel good in the room and want to keep coming back. In the end, all the features in the world cannot compete with trust in a brand.

The bottom line:

- Brand is trust, and people buy from whom they trust.
- Purchase decisions are based not only on features and benefits, but by appealing to deeper motivations. Identifying these motivations and appealing to them is the key to unlocking brand potential.

THE STEPS OF BRAND-BASED SALES

So how do you begin to use brand to make the cash register ring? With these three steps: Drive brand awareness (so people know who you are), induce trial (get them to buy), and repeat (get them coming back for more). Let's take a closer look at each step.

STEP 1: DRIVE BRAND AWARENESS —

Let's face it; if people don't know who you are, it's harder to make a sale. Therefore, increasing awareness for your brand (often referred to as brand recognition) is the first step. But unlike the dot-coms in the late '90s that spent millions to drive awareness, you must first have a plan. In other words, know whom you are trying to reach (your target customer), and what's important to them. Here are a few exercises that will help:

Define your positioning: First, you need to put a stake in the ground by clearly defining who you are, to which segment of the market you most appeal and why. This is called your positioning statement. It looks simple, but be careful not to fall into cliché or non-specific language. The key to the exercise is to put in plain English just where your company fits into the marketplace.

Unlike a mission statement, which is more of an over-arching vision for your company's existence, a positioning statement clearly conveys three things:

1. *Who is your core user?* Defining your target customer in the positioning statement gives your brand personality, strongly suggests the benefits of your brand, and helps illustrate the difference between your brand and the competition.
2. *What is your reference point?* What do you sell? Are you an equipment company? Are you defined by services? The reference point grounds us in what we sell.
3. *What is your point of differentiation?* This is the primary feature or benefit that flows from the reference point and has obvious strong appeal to the core user. Here's where you need to be creative. Think about what your customers really want. Do they want to be younger? Is it a new self-image with weight loss? Better health? Higher personal performance? Oftentimes your point of differentiation is more in the mind and less in the muscles. It may not be a hard feature, like a type of midsole or the button placement on a console, but perhaps how your customers view the benefit.

Remember, the positioning statement isn't supposed to be catchy advertising copy. It's simply a tool to help you focus on where your brand fits into the market. From this simple sentence, you can be sure that all materials, communications and efforts are singing from the same hymnal.

Here's an example of a positioning statement for a fictitious running shoe company we'll call Theseus. Notice it does not speak of technology, features or specific product:

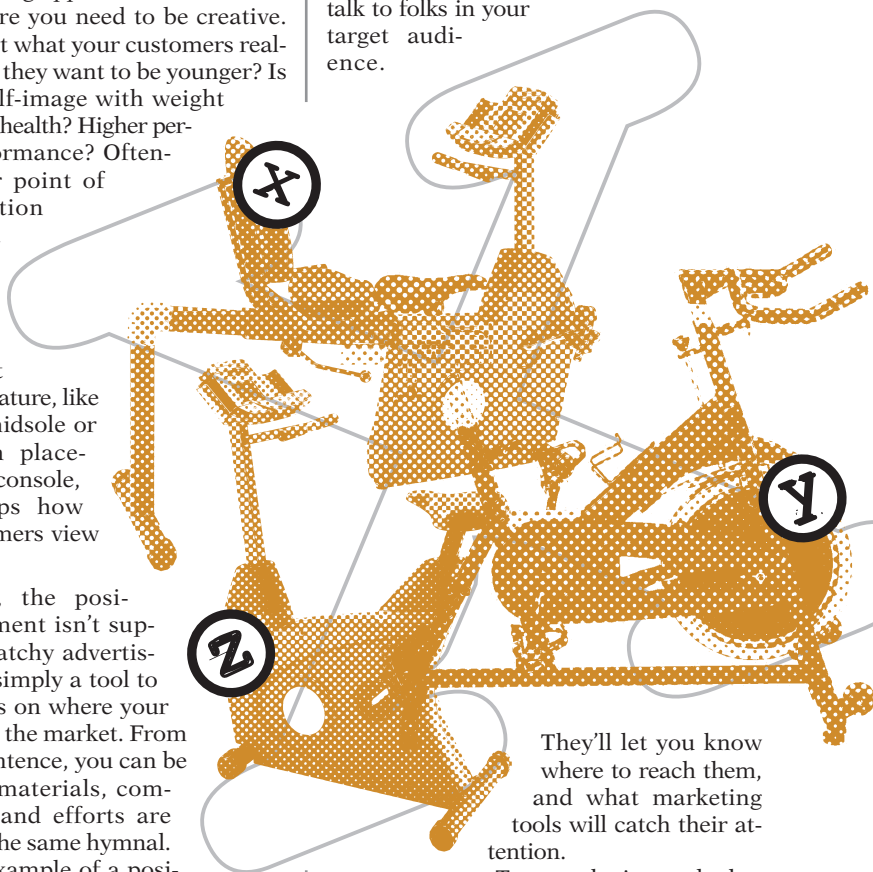
"To the athlete that believes running is among life's basic needs (CORE USER), Theseus provides the footwear and apparel (REFERENCE POINT) that nourishes the mind, body and soul (POINT OF DIFFERENTIATION)."

An aspirational declaration that bleeds passion, commitment and reliance on running, this statement reveals the psychology of the most serious runner, and positions

the company to fill vital physical (product) and emotional (self-image) needs of the prime target. This statement will become the basis for all brand communication, from sales materials to advertisements to point-of-sale promotions.

Broadcasting your message: The second part of the awareness equation is getting your message in front of your target audience. You now know who they are, and how you will appeal to them.

Let's take my experience buying a stepper. I was a customer for the taking, but things could have gone differently if a company had begun to build its brand before I reached the store. Knowing me, what I read, with whom I speak, and how I think is key to driving sales. Go out and talk to folks in your target audience.



They'll let you know where to reach them, and what marketing tools will catch their attention.

Two marketing tools that can always be trusted to drive results are, one, public relations and, two, word of mouth:

- *Use the power of the press:* The third party endorsement of the media is an influential, inexpensive way to strongly position your brand to your target. Magazines from fitness trades to Shape are always looking for new gear to test. Start a relationship with the editors and writers, ask when they plan to test equipment, and keep them up-to-date on all your developments. A short product placement article will work wonders. (continued on page 44)