

BY DON E. SCHULTZ

DOWN WITH BEST PRACTICES

AUTUMN SEEMS TO be the silly season for marketing and communication. Summer's over. The new year is just ahead. Organizations start to think about the future, if only in terms of year-end bonuses, holidays and the like.

And it's the time of the year most marketing organizations, professional associations, seminar organizers, cohort groups and other assorted clusters of individuals gather to discuss the future of the business.

True, given the economic climate, there aren't as many meetings as there once were. And those still operating have moved their venues from resort cities to business hubs and downgraded their facilities to local business hotels. Still, there are enough of them to provide platforms and venues for multitudes of marketing gurus. Anyone who has redone his or her spring-season slides or developed a snappy new title for the same old content is primed to go. Sort of like the rutting season for elks.

Being an inveterate conference attendee and sometimes speaker, I've noticed a distinct change in the caliber and tenor of the 2009 presentations. Simply put: No speaker talks about strategy anymore! Yes, they use the word "strategy" in their presentation titles and sprinkle it around in charts and graphs. But when you hear them speak, you quickly discover they're talking tactics, activities and things to do, not real business-building or changing strategies.

Today's speakers are not talking "strategy" in the way the term was once used, as in long-term, focused approaches designed to achieve organizational goals. They do not talk about what the firm hopes to accomplish, what resources it will employ and how those resources will be acquired, what risk it can accept and the host of other concepts Peter Drucker, Charles Handy, Kenichi Ohmae, C.K. Prahalad and others have used for years to guide organizations into an unknown future.

Instead, most speakers are really talking about a bunch of tactics—the stuff they and their cohorts can use in the short-term to get quick, reduced-price sales or marketplace awareness. Mostly, they seem to be interested in getting today's most highly prized value, a buzz bump. (Wait, sorry, that was last month. This month it's the number of Twitter followers you have.)

These highly vocal advocates call the stuff they do strategies to make them sound more important and, hopefully, more fundable by senior management. So now you hear presentations like "Developing a Social Media Strategy," "Our Facebook Strategy," "Strategic E-mail" or "Buzz Marketing Strategies for Today." In other words, all the things the mid-level people in the organization want to do because they're perceived to be neat or cool or cutting-edge or will generate some Tweeting

followers. It's stuff that gets re-invented every day, depending on what happened the day before. What it isn't is strategic. It never was, never will be.

What happened to business strategy? To marketing strategy? Or even to advertising strategy? (If there ever really was such a thing. A couple of episodes of *Mad Men* might convince you that advertising strategy may only be a figment of an industry-wide, overworked imagination.)

What happened to the carefully considered thought that was supported by data and proven through analytical calculations that show where the firm should be investing its resources? What happened to three-year scenario planning and five-year forecasts? Are those all only hazy memories of how it used to be? Or am I simply getting to be an old fuddy-duddy, longing for the past?

Maybe so.

In sitting through a number of these "hard-hitting, breakthrough, industry-changing" sessions, I think I have identified the problem.

Most every manager around today wants to focus on "best practices." The things



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other companies have done that have worked, or are presented as having worked for specific firms facing specific situations. Managers in the audience carefully note every nuance of what the speaker calls "the most successful program we've ever conducted," and then rush home filled with enthusiasm, anxious to implement the "new strategies" they have learned. And then they commonly fail.

The reason? They're not strategies at all, not even for the organization that used them. They're tactics, pure and simple.

Those best practices are commonly not relevant to the organization trying to implement them. They were developed for a specific organization to solve a specific problem during a specific time period. Adapting or adopting those best practices is not strategic. It's copycatting or, worse still, plagiarizing. But it's sure not strategic.

Many will argue that there isn't time today to do strategic thinking, even if you know how. The demand is too great for quick responses, reactions, solutions or something just to show you're on top of things. But that pressure has always been there. True, it was not with the instant response demands

of today's electronic marketplace, but the requirements have always been the same.

Maybe the solution to the current economic and marketplace challenges is substituting the time you spend following or copying best practices with some serious, hard, comprehensive thought on the challenges you and your organization are facing today and will face tomorrow. It may not get you as much buzz in the hallways, but it might get you more results in the marketplace.

So my answer to what needs to be done? Bundle all the "best practices." Put them in the Dumpster. Then get back to work developing really strategic solutions to issues and problems facing your company, not hand-me-downs from others.

The one thing this is sure to do is save you from more of the cost-reduced luncheon pasta delights at those best practice sessions. ■



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