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Birth Control Branding: Beyond The Palin

What can marketers learn from the ideological opposites of John McCain's running mate and Planned Parenthood? Believe it or not, the same lesson.

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-By Jenny Schade

If you happen to be a marketer with the delicate task of getting the word out about birth control, you probably couldn't believe your luck when the national media gave you the wrapped gift of John McCain's vice presidential running mate. Sarah Palin's stance of teaching only abstinence in public schools was one that, following her admission on Sept. 1 that her 17-year-old daughter was pregnant, suddenly rang with a certain degree of irony. Just how effective could Alaska's just-say-no approach really be, the TV commentators wondered, if its own governor's teenager had a due date?

It's impossible to say whether an earlier debut of Palin (or her family news) would have changed things but, as coincidence would have it, Planned Parenthood has been adjusting its own message of late—not in terms of stance, but target.

An article and corresponding health blog in the June 23 edition of the Wall Street Journal reported that the nonprofit organization is going upscale—"rebranding" (that was PP's term, not the paper's) by opening a network of posh new clinics in affluent suburbs. The expanded approach is designed to attract new patients who can afford to pay full price out-of-pocket. Not surprisingly, a revamped mission statement debuted along with nicer couches for the lobby. The organization is now committed to "leverag[ing] strength through our affiliated structure to be the nation's most trusted provider of sexual and reproductive healthcare." Does that sound like a traditional walk-in clinic to you? Me neither.

I'll leave it to the political pundits to dissect Sarah Palin, but I have some thoughts about Planned Parenthood in general—and its new mission statement in particular. It prompts a big question: Will affluent suburbanites really supplant their private physicians to visit an organization that's been associated with troubled teens and low-income Americans since 1916?

That depends. The way I see it, the achievement of PP's new mission rests entirely upon the people who are ultimately responsible for its success—the organization's own employees. Every PP team member needs to understand its new mission, what it means to his or her job and how to apply it to customers.

I'm not sure I'm optimistic about that happening. In my experience, few organizations seem to understand the importance of instilling a rebranding ethos in the minds of those who actually represent the brand to the public.

During a recent meeting I had with the marketing vp for a large hospital, I said, "I notice the vision on your Web site describes you as unique in the way you collaborate with patients on their care. That's interesting. How does that work?"

There was a brief pause. "We've had that up there for a while," the executive replied, rather sheepishly. "Our CEO loves it, but I don't think I can give you an example of how we actually do that. We should probably consider taking that down."

It never ceases to amaze me how companies will devote extensive resources to develop a mission and strategic goals that satisfy executives in the board room, yet do so little to ensure the understanding of these objectives among the employees. Part of making that happen means using language that's simple, direct and feels intuitive to employees.

A mission statement should, by its very nature, be aspirational and powerful, providing an overriding organizational focus. Consider the oldest mission statement of them all: "Go forth and multiply." That one's worked beautifully ever since Genesis 24:2 was scribed. (One has to wonder what a Planned Parenthood version would read like, but I will refrain.) Here's another: "To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before." I wager that nobody on the starship Enterprise was in doubt of what that meant for each of them.

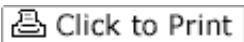
In the criticism we've heard so far of Palin, some have said that her daughter's pregnancy is proof that stating a position is one thing, but getting people to truly practice it is obviously quite another. Well, the same thing holds with Planned Parenthood—and any brand, for that matter. A new mission statement's just fine, but if the group expects to be successful, it will take more than new rhetoric from headquarters.

Jenny Schade is the president of JRS Consulting in Wilmette, Ill. She can be reached at (847) 920-1701 or jenny.schade@jrsconsulting.net.

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