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Exploiting Human Nature:

How to Successfully Market High-Tech New Products

This article discusses how to successfully market high-tech new products.

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Want to sell tons of your high-tech new product or service? Want to make tons and tons of money? Then learn what your brethren (and sistren, too, for that matter) from other more mature industries learned long ago. People do not buy products and services. People buy potions to make themselves feel better, even if temporarily. If you try to sell them products or services, you won't get too far. But if you try to sell them something that will make them feel, say, more relaxed or more attractive or smarter or richer, well, congratulations, you've just joined the new millionaires club.

Why? Because consumers don't care how many features your new gizmo has, we don't care how it does what it claims to do. We just care what's in it for us.

Great technological innovation, even (and sometimes especially) breakthrough technology, is not enough to insure a new product's successful introduction into mass markets. In fact, oftentimes, technological innovation isn't even necessary. To make a hi-tech product acceptable to the masses, i.e., people like you and me (well, me anyway), the product has to give the consumer something he or she wants. It doesn't have to do something in a way never done before. Consumers don't care how you do it, we care what's in it for us. And some of what we want is sex, power, convenience, feeling superior, feeling connected, feeling loved. We feel incomplete and we want to be whole. Products that make people feel a little more complete are products that sell to the masses; products that make somebody very, very rich.

The essential problem here is that hi-tech gadgets are generally developed by really smart people, physicists, engineers and the like. Even the salespeople in hi-tech companies are usually techies. They've just got more personality than your everyday techie. Now smart people, especially those from the physical sciences, tend to be logical, linear. That's great if you want to solve problems that don't involve people, like "How do I get 10 Megs of code into 4 Megs of ROM?". But it's not so good if you want to solve problems that do involve people, like "How do I get 3 million people shopping at WalMart to buy this thing?"

Because people, the normal, everyday kind that make up most of the mass markets we're trying to sell to, are generally, oh, how do I put this? Well, we're not too smart. We're not too smart and we don't like to be reminded of that fact, either. We aren't a few other things, too. We aren't

secure, open to change or nearly as price sensitive as you may think. We are, however, lazy, vain and hedonistic. So what's all that got to do with new products?

Aristotle claimed that what uniquely distinguished humans from all other animals was that humans were rational. Now, Aristotle was smart. Probably would have made a good engineer. Be he was exactly wrong. What really distinguishes humans from the other animals is that we are irrational, and sometimes, arational. That is to say, humans often behave illogically or in a way completely unrelated to logic (alogically).

That's why there is marketing. Marketing is the mystical science of figuring out what makes people behave the way they do so you can make them behave the way you want.

They don't want 64 bits. They want control.

Why do video games sell? At one level, video games are fun, entertaining. But at a deeper level, video games allow people (usually teenage boys and other developmentally delayed humans) to have some control over their environment. Young boys develop considerable and growing frustration with authoritarian control. Video games give them a chance to feel like they are in charge, i.e., like they are the adults they so much want to be. Successful video game developers aren't selling technological superiority. They are selling freedom.

I don't want technology convergence. I want to look cool.

The technology world is scrambling to figure out which of the almost limitless combinations of technologies will be integrated together to create a product that will ring the consumers' bell. Combinations of hi-tech devices and capabilities packaged to fill needs of mass market consumers, create sales to mass market consumers and make massive profits for the companies that build the next Mortal Kombat (who could forget Mortal Monday?). Why is this so difficult? Because the issue is not how do we make this thing work. The issue is what do consumers want this thing to do and how many of them want it to do it? Companies as diverse as AT&T, Microsoft and Time-Warner are all trying to answer this very question.

I frequently take my family to Hawai'i for vacation. What I'd really like is for technology to converge in a device that would show me how to act like a local (instead of the profoundly geekie tourist that I am now, yuh, brah?). What I want is to hang out in Hanalei and look cool. Catch a few beach babe wannabe's from New Jersey staring longingly in my direction. Now, I'd pay for that. Oh, yeah, I'd pay a lot. Do I care if that requires a wireless internet connection, software that automatically updates a database while I'm at the local bar impressing the tourists from Jersey? Do I care if the product requires groundbreaking new technology? Nope, I care about feeling cool, being on the inside. I'll put out big bucks for cool and elitist but I won't spend nearly as much for code or circuits.

Humans don't want to change. We want to take it easy.

Occasionally, a product will offer a benefit so compelling that consumers will radically alter their behavior to use it. But generally, new products that are successful make small behavioral steps. Listening to the radio was an extension of talking around the kitchen table. Television watching was an extension of listening to the radio. Video rental was an extension of television watching. Movies on demand are a natural extension of video rentals. Research indicates this is a product feature that consumers will jump all over.

Why have the network computing devices that offer Web access for a fraction of the cost of a personal computer still not been embraced fully by the mass market? Familiarity is one factor. People resist true novelty. We are afraid of anything we don't understand. Another factor may be that people relate to their televisions in a passive way. We are accustomed to letting the television do all the work. They don't call us couch potatoes for nothing. We've earned that title the old-fashioned way and we won't give it up without a fight. Accessing the Web from your TV requires an entirely new way of relating to that appliance. A way that takes more energy than we are used to spending in front of a TV (at least when it's on). Humans are big on momentum. It takes a lot to change them. What it takes is a compelling answer to the universal question "What's in it for me?"

Why are pornographic web sites far and away the most heavily trafficked web sites in cyberspace? Why does Playboy outsell The Economist? Which one is more fun? Which one is easier to digest? Which one makes you feel better? (Don't lie.)

Consumers don't want product features. We want to go home early.

Years ago, I worked for the dominant advanced word processing software company in the world. They were very focused on a new competitor. Their focus, unfortunately, was on making more bells and whistles for their software than the other guy had in his software. They would literally count the number of features listed in the competitive product's brochure (it was in excess of one hundred) and then set out to create a longer list! Research indicated that their consumers didn't care about features. They cared about getting their jobs done easier and faster. Do I need to mention that the company that once owned 90% market share no longer exists?

We don't want to save money. We want status.

Pricing is an area that really surprises engineers. Cheaper is always better, right? Wrong twice. Sometimes, although I admit rarely, people actually prefer to buy the more expensive product (even when everything but price is identical). I've seen this happen. But more common is the fact that consumers will oftentimes assign status to the more expensive option and then rationalize their way to purchase. Mercedes-Benz cars are much safer to drive than Lexus, aren't they? And, you know, our youngest is only 9.

She doesn't want spices. She just wants her mother's love.

When a grocery shopper stares at a shelf set full of tooth pastes, he or she generally makes a decision about which brand to buy in a split second. Why did he/she pick the brand she did? It's very likely that the packaging played a significant, although subconscious, role. There is ample research which demonstrates that various colors, shapes, typefaces, etc. play a profound role in purchase behavior. I once worked on a new spice package that caused an increase in sales of 20% in the first year, with no marketing support and the old package was flushed through. The background on the new package was a rich forest green, which subconsciously communicated freshness to consumers. And in this case, consumers were primarily housewives cooking for their families. Freshness conveys many powerful benefits such as better taste and healthier meals, which implies being a better cook, a more competent wife and mother, which implies being a better person, gaining the approval of the cook's mother (the psychological laddering just goes on and on). Did those shoppers buy spices or did they confirm and validate their mothers' values?

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History is on our side.

Marketers in more mature industries have a rich history of exploiting human frailties in their quest to sell more products. High technology product developers must understand that product development is not the final step. Once a product exists, the consumer must be made to understand what's in it for him. We've got to be told what this product will give us that we don't already have. And we've got to be told in a way we understand. The developer must forget all the wonderful features he or she has slaved over for the past two years. They don't matter. Not directly. They only matter in that through those features true consumer benefits can be delivered. The developer must either put on a new hat, the marketer's hat, or find a marketer to help. A separate and equally important step as developing the new product in the first place is marketing it to your customer.

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