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B2B-ing Maslow

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Maslow, meet Al Gore.

You may have met Maslow yourself. He often hid in college textbooks on sociology, psychology and marketing. Maslow was the kindly monster who exposed the truth about the nature of humans and our need to climb just like our ape ancestors. Instead of climbing trees, we modern apes climb Maslow's pyramid.

Abraham Maslow, a kindly psychologist from Brooklyn, studied the way shaved apes behave. What Maslow noticed is that we have a set of needs that become progressively psychological – or perhaps psychotic – as our more basic needs are met. For example, only after we find shelter, water and food do we worry about employment, paying rent and the Super Bowl (though I have met a few Denver Bronco fans who would sacrifice food, water and shelter for season tickets).

The other interesting aspect of Maslow's madness is that we cannot achieve our more advanced needs without first achieving lower ones. For instance, forget about finding love, romance and sex if you don't have a job or a house. Humans need to fulfill most of their lower-level needs to even attempt higher ones.

Oddly, this has a lot to do with business to business (B2B) and C-suite marketing and explains why much of both fail.

Limited tipping

The two top rungs of Maslow's slippery pyramid involve the insides of people – their 'self'. Lower tiers in the hierarchy involve elements outside the heart and brain of the apes in question. Food, property, family, booty – these are external items. Maslow's top tiers – self-esteem and self-actualization – involve the individual and how he views himself or how he thinks other people view him.

This is where consumer marketing is smart and where B2B marketing rarely treads. B2B marketers live under the false premise that either corporate needs outweigh individual needs or that people in the executive suites are unaffected by right-brain functions. Yet some of the most effective B2B marketing campaigns employ right-brain messaging to corner office residents.

However, few campaigns try to appeal to executive self-esteem and self-actualization.

Think for a moment about the likelihood that C-suite denizens have fully achieved their lower-tier needs. I would sell stock in any company whose executives did not have a home, food, security, family and a good dental plan. Since all marketing should combine left- and right-brain appeals (functional and emotional), there remain few ways to tap executive emotions except to appeal to self-actualization and self-esteem. If an executive decision is required to sell a product, you must invade their ‘self’.

Some self-ish examples

Before venturing into the dark realm of executive souls, we need to look at some marketing campaigns that appealed to the ‘self’. The best two modern examples are Apple and Al.

Few marketing companies are better than Apple. Their advertising campaign for iPods is legendary for many reasons, not the least of which is that Apple bypassed most of the lower-tier needs in Maslow’s hierarchy and sold to the ‘self’. In Maslow’s top tiers are items such as spontaneity, creativity and confidence. You have to be rather spontaneous, creative and confident to wildly dance in public. Apple’s ads never mentioned iPod features and specification, but they did demonstrate that Nirvana-bordering happiness could be purchased at Best Buys.

The other great 21st century sales job was anthropogenic global warming (AGW), or the theory/fear that humans were turning their only inhabited planet into a rotisserie oven. Leaving the science debate aside, the concept had to be sold to the public. Using fear was a natural marketing tool for Al Gore since fear is the primary tool of politicians. But with limited life spans, some of your neighbors would happily build their own coal-fired plants just to stay warm during the winter, future generations be damned. So proponents of the AGW theories needed other appeals. Since their campaign was targetted at industrialized countries – places where most people have homes, food and occasionally sex – AGW campaigns needed to appeal to higher-level needs. Al pitched to the ‘self’ in all of us.

What Al and Apple had in common is that their audiences had most of their physiological, safety and social needs met. To get people dancing in the streets or dashing to buy hybrid autos required appealing to their self-esteem or self-actualization.

Corporate ‘self’

Can I complicate things for you a bit more? Tough – I’m going to anyway.

Organizations have a sense of ‘self’ which is reflected in personal ways (such as the founder’s credo) or impersonal ways (mission statements and human resources policies). Thus, organization-wide senses of ‘self’ can create barriers to entry for a product. This is rare because if your product is so far afield from communal externalizations of respect, achievement and morality, then odds are, your product isn’t for many people at all.

There are, however, exploitive points where products that agree with or accelerate organizational ‘self’ needs will receive unfair advantage. This brings us back to Al Gore and AGW theory.

Many organizations are now aligned with the neo-green movement (not to be confused with the 1960s 'ecology' movement, though many gray-haired hippies participated in both). If formalized and embraced by the majority of members, or by just key decision makers, such organization 'self' needs become decision criteria. If Mega Multi Corp decides they are the polar bears' best friend and that they will be greener than grass, messages that reinforce their enterprise green 'self' needs will be accepted. A product does not need to reduce Mega Multi Corp's carbon footprint, but 'green' messaging will influence the buy decision.

Executive 'self'

The same applies to executives. All other things being equal, decisions will be influenced by aligning a product or messaging with the buyer's needs. For executives this almost entirely rests on matters of his or her 'self', since all their lower-level personal and corporate needs have likely been met. If selling to the C-suite is required, then selling to their personal and corporate self-esteem and self-actualization may be the deal clincher.

One key problem is that there are many aspects to self-esteem (confidence, achievement, respect, etc.) or self-actualization (morality, creativity, etc.), and each organization or executive is focused on a different subset. You may need to glean their 'self' needs from websites, biographies or personal conversations before composing c-level communications.

You also may not know to which level the organization or individual an executive ape has climbed. If you guess they are striving for self-actualization when in fact they are struggling to achieve self-esteem, then your messaging will be wasted – they are not ready to rise that far up Maslow's mountain.

Smarter organizations with disciplined executive sales teams unconsciously play the 'self' game. Golf course schmoozing is more about analyzing the executive than discussing business. A boss who rants over missing a putt is at a different level on Maslow's ladder than one who confidently laughs it off. Great sales people adapt to the individual.

Great marketing people adapt to the organization. Since marketing worries more about mass communications, it is hamstrung by having to work in aggregates. Within a target segment, marketing assesses the 'typical' level of organizational elevation up Maslow's tree. Marketing should determine if appeals to the organization 'self' are necessary (if SMBs are your market, maybe not); and if so, it should determine if esteem or actualization are the sweet spots. If including organization 'self' interest is necessary, marketing people must match their product's ability to improve one or more aspects of corporate 'self' with branding and messaging.

Such clever marketing people will have loads of self-esteem and might actualize themselves into a fat bonus check.

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