

Based on: "From Understanding to Action" by David C. Swaddling and Charles Miller

It is not good enough in today's global business environment to simply create an exceptional product or offer a superb service and then expect it to attract consumers like honey draws bees. This, of course, is the basis of the concept of marketing. And one of the main components of marketing is truly understanding customers, and then acting on their perceived needs, hence the title of the article by Swaddling and Miller, "From Understanding to Action."

It is vital for marketers to really attempt to get to know their target market, from what it thinks is "cool" and would consider buying to what it is outright offended by. Swaddling and Miller's article has a caption that reads, quite concisely: "To win customers, first find out what's valuable to them." It seems simple enough, but many companies have mistranslated slogans and made otherwise insulting mistakes in trying to target diverse markets, such as those abroad. The Boone and Kurtz textbook gives examples of mistranslations in large, otherwise respectable companies. Kentucky Fried Chicken, advertising its business in China, turned its slogan, "Finger lickin' good," into Chinese for "Eat your fingers off." Although the humor may work to attract some customers, others may be offended, and the mistake may be so serious as to completely alienate the entire target market.

Getting to know a company's target market does not just literally translate to "translate your slogans well." It also means learning about the culture, and what things signify what; for example, clocks, straw sandals, and handkerchiefs symbolize death to the Chinese, so any organization would be better off without them in its advertisements or other marketing efforts. In Thailand, too much hand gesturing can lead to ridicule, and in Canada, "the victory sign (index and middle fingers outstretched) with palm facing inward instead of outward will be considered rude." (Boone and Kurtz 229)

In "From Understanding to Action," the authors lay out a systematic way to conduct market research, but unlike Isabella Trebond's "On Target" (Richardson 82-84), "From Understanding to Action" deals mainly with the collection of primary, qualitative data. Marketers should not let their own perceptions of things such as features on a new car get in the way of consumer research---in effective, give the consumers what they want, but do not judge them.

The first step in Swaddling and Miller's plan is measuring customer perceptions by identifying "the factors that constitute customers' definitions of value," deciding the relative importance of each of the factors, which may include price, reliability, personal/social benefits ("the feeling one gets driving a sleek car with its top down"), and other things defined specifically by the customer (Richardson 48-49).

But this type of research is not enough. "Those who really understand their customers know how to turn that knowledge into actions that make a difference" (Richardson 48). And the way that this data is turned into usable knowledge is by weighing the relative importance of each customer-identified factor against its perceived quality by the consumer. "From Understanding to Action" contains a diagram labeled "customer perceived value," which is divided into four equal portions, much like a grid with four quadrants. Based on consumer response, businesses can plot each factor of value to consumers in one of the quadrants, and then decide if it is wasting too much energy on a factor that the consumer does not think much of or if it is spending too little

time trying to improve something the consumer values highly. Swaddling and Miller also advise businesses to defend their brands and the values they offer; often, seeing the other side of the coin is all that a customer needs to appreciate what they are being offered.

Another tactic in “From Understanding to Action” is the idea that businesses can convince consumers that some of the factors they don’t value very highly should in fact be of major consideration. For instance, “Las Vegas has increased the level of promotion of its all-important tourism business since the economy turned down a few years ago...The city is taking one of its characteristics that most people probably had not previously considered [that tourists are allowed to ‘be themselves’ and misbehave without penalty] in deciding where to vacation and promoting it as something that should be more important to prospective visitors” (Richardson 51).

The final, all-important strategy that a business can use to promote itself is to invent altogether new factors of value to the target market. A company that has demonstrated an exceptional ability at inventing valuable factors now sits at the top: Wal-Mart. It has “everyday low prices...a vast array of brand name products...continues to expand its list of product categories offered...[and appeals] as a ‘one-stop shopping’ experience” (Richardson 50). The key to its success, obviously, is not just its invention of key factors that consumers respond to, but also the fact that it keeps close tabs on each of them. Most executives, however, despite spending tons of money on market research, probably cannot clearly define the value factors their companies offer.

In today’s business world, it is essential to know not only exactly who you are targeting but also why. What is of value to them? Why should they even consider purchasing your product? And what sets you apart from the next company listed in the Verizon Yellow Pages? Companies need to be creative when it comes to giving people reasons to buy their products and services, and the one surefire way to give people these reasons is to get them from the people. If approached the right way, members of any target market can provide companies with valuable information about what they are really thinking when they choose to buy something from the company. Then the only challenge that remains is for marketers to attempt to replicate that kind of thought process in another potential consumer, and turn the consumer into a regular buyer and perhaps even an advocate of the company’s products and services.