

Baby Love

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We're just three months into the first year of the “we” decade, and the search is on for brands that are leading us to a higher, more purposeful place. In the last issue of the *Hub*, I wrote about the idea that it's no longer enough for brands to focus on our individual wants and needs; the new path is to join with consumers and work together toward larger goals (see: *The We Decade*, Jan/Feb 2010).

The “we decade” began almost ten years ago for J&J’s BabyCenter.

The new mantra of this new decade is “me, we, higher purpose.” Many brands are good at marketing to “me,” which requires reaching a deep, aspirational desire or need. Doing this right means transcending rational, functional or emotional benefits, and getting at subconscious behavioral drivers.

The “we” part is trickier because it shifts the relationship away from “us” (the brand) and “them” (the consumer), which is how most

marketers view the world. The idea is to get to a place where we are at one with our consumers, and have a mutual mission based on shared ideals.

When we deliver on “higher purpose,” it blows away traditional measures of return-on-investment. Consumers—especially women—are seeking greater meaning in their lives. They are seeking brands that are not just trustworthy, but also committed to making the world a better place.

Me, we, higher purpose—it’s a tall order. It’s also a short list, when it comes to brands that are on this track. But I hit paydirt on November 6, 2009, while attending, as a speaker, the M2W-HC, the Conference for Marketing Healthcare to Women, in Washington, DC.

The luncheon roundtable featured Tina Sharkey, chairman and global president of BabyCenter.com. I had not heard of Tina or BabyCenter before she got up to speak. She had joined BabyCenter in 2007, having led social networking at AOL and was a co-founder of iVillage, so this surprised me. But what she had to say made me feel like I had known her all my life.

Although BabyCenter has been owned by Johnson & Johnson since 2001 (it was previously owned by eToys), it operates independently and its mission is not to promote or sell more Johnson & Johnson products. In fact, you have to drill down pretty far even to find a reference to the J&J ownership on the website.

Instead, Johnson & Johnson appears to be just one of many sponsors, which remarkably include competitors like Procter & Gamble and Kimberly-Clark, among many others.

The first thing Tina said was that BabyCenter is designed to be mom's "trusted advisor and best friend." This might be dismissed as hyperbole, except that BabyCenter reaches eight million new and expectant moms in the United States — that's 78 percent of the total! It reaches another 16.5 million in 21 other markets worldwide.

Even more important, Tina said, 73 percent of these moms "return weekly for trusted advice and friendship" and "70 percent say that if they could only use one source to make them a better parent, it would be BabyCenter."

These numbers are phenomenal by any standard. In a follow-up telephone conversation with Tina, I asked her how BabyCenter had managed to earn that kind of trust and connection with moms. She said they did it by being "remarkably right." That might sound a little arrogant on the face of it, but it really isn't. It's just a reflection of how serious BabyCenter is about what it does.

Year after year, when moms come to the site for information or advice, they get what they need and it's accurate. This starts with expert-written articles, backed by a large medical advisory board, and continues with conversations among the moms who frequent the site. This is not about marketing; it's about anticipating a mom's needs, knowing what's going on in her body, with her child and in her family.

The "me," in this case, is around a woman's priority to be a good mother. Yes, she cares about the environment and other issues, but when it comes down to it, the thing she cares the most about is her baby and how she's doing as a parent. So, BabyCenter's "me" is about empowering her to be the best mom she can be.

One result is that BabyCenter benefits from a lot of word-of-mouth promotion. Another is that it enjoys a golden pot of insight. Because these moms deeply trust BabyCenter, they are willing to share their insights in a big way: When BabyCenter fields a survey to its panel of 85,000 moms, the open and response rate has been as high as 90 percent.



BabyCenter certainly scores very high when it comes to the "me" part of our marketing mantra. It does such an amazing job of understanding what really matters to moms on an individual level that they return the favor by sharing their opinions.

This goes a long way toward answering the question that has dogged so many marketers as they try to figure out the marketing benefit of social networks. According to Tina, 78 percent of moms want marketers to interact with them. They want to be heard. They want to talk to marketers and tell them what they love and don't love, and how they can make their products or services better.

INSIGHT IS THE NEW FORM OF MEDIA

Moms may not be looking for ads, but they are looking for interaction and conversation. They love hearing about new products and getting samples, and BabyCenter provides that. As Tina says, “Insight is the new form of media.” In other words, media is no longer about buying a demographic; it’s about investing in engagement, trust and the insights that result from the conversation.

As challenging as that sounds, it’s not the hardest part. Other brands also do a great job with “me.” Indeed, every successful brand has done at least a good job understanding consumer wants or needs on some level. BabyCenter doesn’t stop there, however; it takes those individual desires and rolls them up into a self-organized community, a collective “we.”

The “we” is all of these women coming together in a common purpose, and helping each other succeed. This starts right at the beginning. When a new or expectant mom signs up for BabyCenter, she is immediately connected with others whose child is exactly the same age. So, if you are one-month pregnant, you are put in a “birth club” with others who are also one-month pregnant.

This ensures that each woman is in touch with others who are going through the same things at the same time. They share common affinity in the same space. Yes, they have spouses, friends and family who love and support them, but that’s not the same as someone who is experiencing the same questions, fears and joys that they are going through as new or expectant moms.

As Tina explains, “We do have community monitors, but they’re not leading the conversations. They’re just dropping by, checking in and hosting certain boards. But for the most part, it is just mom-to-mom wisdom.”

This brings the emotional intensity higher because the moms are in a place that’s larger than just themselves. What they get is not sympathy, but, more important, empathy. It’s a different emotion, and, above all, they’re not alone.

It delivers that sense of “we” every minute, every hour and every day. It’s there all the time. If you wake up at three in the morning and your baby has a fever, other moms will be there with you. BabyCenter calls this phenomenon “voluntary love.” You go to BabyCenter’s Facebook page, and, unsolicited, moms are posting love messages.

Quaker’s Mom Power

Challenge:

- Quaker wanted to establish its brand as a trusted, authentic partner among proactive, health-and-wellness seeking moms.

Objectives:

- Drive awareness, trial and purchase of the Quaker portfolio of products.
- Create brand ambassadors and amplify positive word-of-mouth buzz.

Solution:

- Develop Mom Power, a custom-sponsored group, featuring edible bites of BabyCenter’s parenting advice, information and tools to help mom fuel her kid’s mind and body.
- Tap into BabyCenter’s Mom Squad sampling program to gather key brand/product insights and ignite word-of-mouth.
- Leverage social media framework to facilitate sharing — from mom-to-mom wisdom to coupons.

Results:

- Unaided brand awareness increased by 461 percent.
- Mom Power set a new record with 1,000 members joining within one month.

Source: BabyCenter LLC

Taken together, the “me” and the “we” arrive at the “higher purpose,” which is about bringing healthier children into the world and supporting that journey every step of the way, both mentally and physically. When moms are happier, healthier and more confident, they are enhancing the next generation.

This completes a story that begins with satisfying consumer wants and needs, continues with creating a sense of community among those consumers and

culminates in making a better world for everyone involved.

RETURN ON LOVE

While marketing, in the usual sense, is not the primary focus at BabyCenter, the marketing implications and opportunities are hard to miss. Perhaps more than any other lifestage change, pregnancy profoundly changes women as consumers. During her speech, Tina talked about the *21st Century Mom Report*, a survey of some 25,000 moms across the United States.

According to this report, which was based on a total of 18 individual surveys, 73 percent of moms said they changed their purchase criteria after becoming pregnant, and 62 percent changed brands. It's also worth noting that after becoming a parent, 89 percent of moms said they were more likely to consider the environmental impact of their purchases.

Her media focus also changes, Tina said, "from entertainment to finding answers." Moms are especially drawn to videos, with 73 percent reporting watching an online video in the past month. Not surprisingly, social networks are also a huge draw, having experienced a 462 percent increase since 2006!

Moms are more likely to use their mobile phones, too, with 89 percent reporting increased use of text messaging since becoming moms, and 91 percent saying they never leave home without their mobile phones. Accordingly, BabyCenter launched a *text4baby*, a free mobile service that delivers text messages designed to help moms through their pregnancy and their child's first year.

In many ways, Tina sees BabyCenter's partnership with marketers as similar to its partnership with moms "in that we help them find the moms when and where they should be talking to them." This sometimes means opening up certain topics to sponsorship.

Quaker Oats, for example, sponsors a group centered on nutritional issues (*see sidebar*). Flip, the video-camera brand, creates community around videotaping and storytelling.

Says Tina, "It's about understanding what's in their hearts and minds so that your product, your messaging, your services and your media is in sync with where a mom is in her life so she's receptive to those messages."

Success, she continues, is measured in many ways. "We measure success first based on unique visitors and page views and time spent on the site as compared to our competitors. In each of those areas, we are a minimum of two times more successful than our closest competitors." She also says success is based on how much marketing and advertising they are selling.

But the secret is that by keeping their focus on the moms, everything else takes care of itself. It's about putting the moms, and not the money, first. BabyCenter is magnifying the outcomes by working with other brands and allowing them to borrow their trust, as well. That's a very different kind of business model.

It's all about give and take: BabyCenter brings moms information and connects them with other women, while also giving them a chance to have a voice. At the same time, it allows BabyCenter to get at insights into what moms really want and need. And then they share all of this with other marketers, even competitors.

As our conversation was ending, I asked Tina what it has meant to her to be part of BabyCenter. She said, "Success is great in life, but significance is what I aim for. BabyCenter is an amazing platform to actually make a difference in people's lives on a broad scale." That sums it all up beautifully.

BabyCenter is one of the best examples of *me, we, higher purpose* I've found so far. What's so impressive is that they don't necessarily shout about it. I wouldn't be surprised if a majority of *Hub* readers, like me, hadn't even heard of Tina Sharkey or BabyCenter before.

It's not like Tina and her team have carved it in stone or written it down. They just do it. They take the time to work hard to get it right, and the payoff is enormous—for their moms, their business partners, and themselves.

Now, how about the rest of us? ■



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