

Chapter 4

Jumpstarting Sales

The Emotional Triggers That Solved the Mystery of a Weak Category

Using the bell curve to chart performance, most businesses inhabit the vast middle. Residing in a place equivalent to “average” has become risky. Years ago “average” suggested “solid.” Not anymore; now the word is a red flag, warning of oncoming danger. The literal definition of “average” is “normal” or “typical.” But that’s not the connotation and it’s rarely the reality. Today “average” is spelled “m-e-d-i-o-c-r-e,” and mediocre organizations tend to simply peter out over time. This is the story about a company in such a predicament, because, although sales overall were decent, they continually missed projections in their most profitable product category. Their inability to jumpstart sales in this category put a damper on the bottom line. Emotional-trigger research solved the mystery of this underperforming category and provided the insights needed to turn the business around.

It is easier to manufacture seven facts out of whole cloth than one emotion.

—Mark Twain

LESSON #1

The context in which information is received drives opinions and actions.

An Inconvenient Truth

A leading national organization within the automotive after-market industry provided a combination of parts, supplies, and services to both the commercial and consumer sectors. In general, sales were good, but, no matter how aggressively this company marketed their quality assortment of private-label tires, they couldn't generate much enthusiasm.

Executives within the company couldn't understand the resistance to their private-label tires. It was a complete mystery. All the "facts" in their possession suggested sales should be better. It was quite inconvenient that reality had a nasty way of conflicting with these irrefutable "facts." In desperation, the decision was made to use emotional-trigger research to find out why customers were so unwilling to buy these tires.

An Unlikely Combination: Tires and Emotion

Many of you probably think the purchasing decision regarding tires is pretty cut and dry, making it a perfect candidate for a quantitative survey. After all, what could be more devoid of emotion than buying tires? We started out thinking that ourselves. Well we were wrong, and if you were thinking along the same lines as us, you'd be wrong too.

The Way It Was

This automotive aftermarket's extensive line of private-label tires was manufactured by a respected company within the industry. Tests conducted at the manufacturer's facility confirmed the

performance of these tires ranked as good or in some cases better than comparable recognized brands. Additionally, they were priced 20 to 30 percent below those same national brands.

“They were absolutely convinced...the price differential would set them apart.”

Executives believed the combination of favorable test results and significant savings made their tires the obvious choice. They were absolutely convinced, given the tires’ performance parity with nationally recognized brands, the price differential would set them apart. For years, it was the principal thrust of all their marketing efforts.

They couldn’t fathom why more tires weren’t selling. Everyone was convinced the problem was with the advertising, marketing, or sales department. Someone wasn’t plugging the benefits aggressively enough. The graphics weren’t exciting enough. The comparable savings weren’t obvious enough. The sales team wasn’t convincing enough. Maybe their training program wasn’t good enough. Or, a personal favorite, maybe the customers were just confused.

Price, Price, Price

To some degree, management was right about pricing. There were indeed price conscious customers always on the lookout for a “deal.” Capturing these customers was easy. But there weren’t enough of them, and, to make matters worse, they were the least-profitable customer segment. An exclusive emphasis on price failed to achieve the company’s primary goal of increasing tire sales overall. Still, they remained committed to restricting their assortment to private-label tires, because they were more profitable than national brands, but, clearly, something had to change.

Management viewed price as an absolute. It wasn’t. In fact, very few customers said they purchased tires somewhere else because they got a better price. The company had put all their eggs

in the wrong basket. Emotional-trigger research revealed a strong disconnect between the company's assumptions and what customers valued. In fact, price was only a "deal clincher" when customers were convinced all the alternatives under consideration were identical. Otherwise, they chose the product that matched their exact requirements. Price was not a stand-alone issue.

Peace of Mind: Priceless!

The majority of customers, though not necessarily brand specific, were definitely brand focused. On an intellectual level, the customers participating in these interviews linked a name-brand tire with quality. But the emotional trigger was about something much more real, something infinitely more heartfelt. It was about that intangible longing for peace of mind. They assumed that major manufacturers of nationally recognized brands were reputable, had an established track record, and produced safe products. For them the "familiar" carried the implication of "reliable;" the unfamiliar made them nervous.

These customers understood the concept of private-label merchandise. Most of them routinely bought store branded apparel, groceries, or household products without giving it a second thought. But they were far less casual when it came to the company's line of private-label tires. A poor decision could directly jeopardize their safety or their family's safety. That was why they refused to buy them. As far as they were concerned, the tires were unproven. They really didn't know much about them.

No other emotional trigger impacted the automotive after-market company's ability to increase tire sales more than peace of mind. It outweighed all other considerations. Purchasing a private-label can of peaches or T-shirt from a local department store was one thing. Putting themselves or their family, particularly their children, in a situation that might be dangerous was quite another. Car accidents often resulted in serious injuries, even death. The stakes were too high, and nothing they had seen or heard was

sufficient to reassure them. Then there was another factor. Counterbalancing the desire for peace of mind was an equally strong, negative emotional trigger: skepticism.

Gaining a comfort level with these private-label tires demanded more than a good sales pitch, eye-catching product literature, or advertising. Customers wanted information in “context.” They didn’t trust the results of tests conducted by the manufacturer. They needed third party assurances that specifically compared these tires to major national brands and certified that the performance and safety were every bit as good. Only hard “evidence” from legitimate independent testing facilities would convince them.

Previous research had repeatedly documented customer resistance to purchasing the private-label tires. Quantitative studies were framed exclusively as statistics, rankings, and ratings, while focus groups were no more helpful. Reasons were provided, but “actionable” insight was missing.

Emotional-trigger research dispelled the notion that tires were a purely objective purchase decision based on the sharpest prices, the manufacturer’s test results, or the best advertising. In reality, it was a highly charged issue that centered on peace of mind. Unless that need was satisfied, there would be no realistic chance to boost sales.

Tellingly, each of the key emotional triggers came across as a strong need.

EMOTIONAL TRIGGER	WHAT EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS REVEALED
Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="460 309 858 586">☐ Above all, customers needed peace of mind. They simply wouldn't entrust their safety, or more importantly, the safety of their family, to a product they considered unproven. The risks associated with driving on inferior tires were too great. <li data-bbox="460 597 858 940">☐ Customers needed reassurance, which could be gained through proof. They needed to know their decision was based on information that came from a source with no vested interest in their purchase decision. They believed an independent source had their best interest at heart. <li data-bbox="460 951 858 1125">☐ Customers needed to be able to trust that what they were being told was the truth. If they were unsure, the unknown was too frightening.

The Answer

When the need for peace of mind was revealed, it became possible to go beyond what was merely accurate and focus instead on what was real. It enabled the automotive aftermarket company to dispense with “solutions” based on internally held assumptions

or on a misinterpretation of the “facts.” Now they were positioned to focus on what really mattered most to their customers.

“The key was to hire a respected independent testing facility that customers would know and trust.”

A winning strategy required proof that the quality and performance of the private-label tires were equal to nation-

ally recognized brands. The key was to hire a respected independent testing facility that customers would know and trust. When this facility confirmed the private-label tires were as good as leading national brands, it would provide the element of credibility that was missing. This was the “impartial” endorsement the company needed to increase sales and to initiate an aggressive marketing campaign focused on the right issue. At every point of customer contact, the testing results were the “ammunition” for reassuring customers and giving them peace of mind.

Once the truth was known, the solutions presented themselves: Use advertising to publicize the name of the testing facility and the results. Include performance and quality comparisons with each of the leading national brands. Emphasize the testing facility’s credentials and as well as promoting favorable results in collateral sales material. Train the sales team on how to position the features and benefits of the private-label tires. Teach them how to frame the testing results in response to the most important emotional triggers. Finally, post the testing facility’s findings prominently on the company’s Website.

Emotional-trigger research provided a path to a more profitable future. It demonstrated that customer values are not abstract or objective, but very subjective. Although standard industry logic suggested price and performance were the key customer considerations, their emotional triggers were actually trust and outside validation. Opinions were formed and actions were based on the “context” in which information was received.

SUMMING UP: JUMPSTARTING SALES

Situation

A leading national automotive aftermarket company providing parts, supplies, and services experienced only modest success. An inability to jumpstart sales in their most profitable category put a damper on the bottom line. For years, their private-label tires, manufactured by a respected industry leader, missed sales projections. According to the manufacturer's tests, quality and performance were comparable to the major, recognized brands, but the tires sold for 20 to 30 percent less. Given the price differential, the company believed it to be their competitive advantage and made it the focus of their marketing efforts. Although promoting price enabled the company to capture the least profitable "bargain hunters," it did nothing to increase sales overall. Emotional-trigger research was conducted with existing customers that had never purchased the private-label tires to find out why they hadn't.

The Customers' Emotional Triggers

Most customers weren't knowledgeable about tires and, given the safety issues, needed reassurance. The potential risk associated with making the wrong decision frightened them. They needed to trust the information they were given and the source of that information.

Genuine Insight

Customers believed the manufacturer's test results were clouded by self-interest. When they bought tires, the safety of their families was a top priority. Because of the potentially serious consequences of driving on poor quality tires, price

alone was not the determining factor. The marketing strategy had to address peace of mind.

Solution

Peace of mind was the emotional trigger that unlocked the mystery of this underperforming category. The solution was to retain a highly regarded and well-known independent testing facility to document that these private-label tires were comparable, in both quality and performance, to the nationally recognized brands. This was the missing impartial and credible endorsement the company needed. Once armed with legitimate proof, the findings provided the ammunition to launch an aggressive three-pronged advertising, marketing, and sales initiative.