

Selling to the Next Generation

With buzz marketing, Julie Roehm gets young consumers to listen—and buy.

In the 1990s, American auto firms found themselves facing a generation gap. The brands that had appealed to Baby Boomers were fading, and younger, hipper Generation X consumers were opting for Japanese and European imports. And individualistic Generation Y teens—the largest youth market yet—weren't listening to conventional sales pitches.

What would it take for an American automaker to reach future car-buyers? According to **Julie Roehm, '95**, director of Dodge marketing communications, connecting with younger consumers—and reconnecting with the rest of the market—meant changing the face of traditional advertising.

“Over time, we've stepped up marketing communications to such a level that people become numb to the barrage of messages,” said Roehm, 31. “To spark a sensation in a person, you have to be creative and break through in unexpected ways. That's especially true for a young audience.”

To do this, Roehm relies on a “more integrated, episodic approach” to marketing. At Ford, for example, she was brand manager of the new Focus—a compact car designed for the youth market, which she targeted in the 1999 launch.

“Targeting GenX and -Y'ers gave us permission to break the mold of traditional automotive launch advertising,” Roehm said. The launch's key strategy was “buzz and viral marketing.” Roehm's team identified several influential young trendsetters in various markets—such as radio DJs and celebrity assistants—and loaned each person a free Focus for six months. In return, the driver discussed the vehicle and gave out Focus paraphernalia to anyone who was interested. This created a word-of-mouth campaign that appeared to come from key members of the target audience, giving the campaign a grassroots credibility that traditional advertising often lacks.

The message broke through, and the Focus outsold the popular Honda Civic in some months after the launch. Now with DaimlerChrysler, Roehm is using lessons from the Focus launch to give the entire Dodge lineup an edgier, more aggressive image—including a high-profile alliance with the perennially popular band Aerosmith. “It is a great

opportunity to be able to build a unique image for a full line of vehicles,” she said of her May 2001 job change.

Why are American automakers paying so much attention to this particular youth market? Roehm points to the cautionary tale of Generation X. For years, many corporate marketers ignored this group in favor of the larger Baby Boomer demographic—and now, GenX loyalties lie with other brands. “It was a good lesson that when consumers are young, you can't afford to ignore them and hope they get the message,” Roehm said.

Since the current youth market—Generation Y—is the largest in history, finding and sustaining the right marketing approach is crucial. “Generation Y will create alliances and loyalty, and if we aren't there talking to them, they will be [listening] to somebody else.”

For Roehm, projecting a strong identity is key to building this loyalty and helps generate the word-of-mouth support buzz and viral marketing rely on. “We're not looking to appeal to everyone,” she said. “I'd rather have half the people have an active, positive response and the other half have an active, negative response than have 100 percent have a passive, positive response. For autos, that's death. Consumers in the active, positive sector become your advocates. Having them talk among themselves is worth a thousand times more than what I can do.”

In addition to its consumer success, the new marketing looks good financially. Because buzz marketing has the potential to reach—and convince—more consumers, the returns on investment are generally high. “[Quantitative measurement] validates what we do with the consumer and to our shareholders, and that's what ultimately counts,” Roehm said.—Emily Hilligoss

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