

AMERICAN EXPRESS UNITES AROUND CUSTOMERS

BY MILA D'ANTONIO, STAFF WRITER

At American Express, Judy Leidy, director of message and channel management, compares her organization to telling the story of "Little Red Riding Hood." Everyone knows the popular children's tale. But if you give the basic elements (a wolf, little girl, grandmother, a cape and a forest) to 10 people, they'd come up with 10 different stories.

When it comes to consumer communications, Amex has unified its messaging by consistently advertising. On the B2B side, that messaging is a bit more complex. Using the Red Riding Hood comparison, Leidy conveys the situation at American Express prior to unifying the brand and customizing individual B2B documents. "We had all the [content] elements, and people put them together however they saw fit," she says. "Everyone had their own interpretation of the customer's value proposition and everyone sold a little differently. We didn't feel there was control over the message, nor over the way it was presented."

American Express operated as a product-centric organization, rather than a customer-centric one. The company had great products and great benefits, but the sales and marketing department both spent more time presenting them than they did actually understanding how they could fit different customer needs, Leidy explains.

The problem stemmed from the company's content silos, which housed outdated and irrelevant communications collateral. As a result, sales reps created materials with varying and misplaced logos and enterprise messages. In addition, reps searched endlessly for current company brand content and product offerings. On the other hand, the marketing department spent most of its time answering ad-hoc sales questions, rather than decommissioning outdated content and syndicating the brand for mass use.

As a result, customers didn't understand how the brand's B2B offerings impacted their daily business. Those offerings included no service fees, free small business advisory services and opportunities to interact with a community of other Amex vendors. "We would assume that we were not getting the business that we could have if they [the B2B customers] had been more targeted," she says.

Embarking on change

To articulate the value that it could bring to its B2B customers, Amex embarked on what it calls a Customer Message Management (CMM) change initiative. At a 2002 workshop, Leidy's team rounded up the sales and account development teams to talk about customers' objectives.

"We said, 'let's forget about products and services and let's focus today on what our customers are saying to us.'" Marketing sat silent while 60 sales and account development employees each wrote one customer comment and one business objective on yellow sticky notes. The team then grouped the answers into same-theme buckets. "By the end of the morning, we had a set of objectives that really represented our customers' common business objectives," she says. The next afternoon, the group discussed the processes and solutions it could provide to meet the customer needs and business objectives.

The marketing team developed messaging to match its newly targeted customer focus. Leidy says there was a lot of trial and error during this point and Leidy's team constantly bounced ideas off the sales team. "We'd show them a letter or presentation and ask, 'does this resonate with you? What would a customer think?'"

Using a product from Ventaso, American Express now customizes its messaging at customer touchpoints, designing its communications around individual demographics and business objectives. When sending collateral, a sales or marketing employee simply programs the customized features into the template that contains the unified, pre-programmed and approved company brand messages. The system automatically designs that communication.

The company's CMM strategy and technology is only in its infancy, so results have yet to be calculated. Leidy says she already knows that CMM has helped to increase customer-facing time, as well as ramp-up time for new employees.

Marketing also has been called out on less ad-hoc requests and can focus on creating syndicated messages. "Now we have a synergistic approach to our marketing."

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