

Japan marketers in need of 'branding' not 'badging' savvy



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Until recently, branding in Japan has focused on corporate identity. The only way to get the consumer to buy was to build a strong sense of trust and reliability in the corporation behind the product. As a result, many Japanese ads left the consumer wondering what was being advertised — although there was no confusion as to who was doing the advertising.

Thanks to recent changes, largely in retail distribution, there has been an enormous proliferation of products and brands in the marketplace. Products need a clear, individual image or personality. Now, more than ever, the need to attach values to the products is crucial.

“The big buzz in the Japanese advertising scene these days is ‘branding’. Suddenly, everyone has discovered branding — and so we have brand seminars, brand workshops; branding tools, brand theories — but all with bad timing,” says David Meredith, president of Japan’s Bates Yomiko. For this big buzz is happening at the end of more than 10 years of economic stagnation, when budgets allocated to build brands aren’t what they used to be.

Agencies have to bring their global knowledge of branding to the Japan market; some may even try to educate their clients. Phil Rubel, managing director at Fallon Japan, thinks that from a communications perspective, more and more marketers in Japan are recognising that people are looking for a deeper, more genuine relationship with brands. It’s about adding value rather than ‘badging’. In these economic doldrums, it is about helping his clients outsmart their competition, instead of just outspending them.

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Meredith, looking further than communication, thinks clients these days need some aggressive sales thinking applied to their advertising. Marketers in Japan have no time to wait for the long-term payback of a solely brand-building campaign. Agencies need to offer provocative, stimulating and original ideas to get target consumers to reach for their wallets.

Put simply by TBWA CEO Bob Kerwin, you have to make the client’s brand famous. One way is by avoiding what everyone else does and tapping into the unique media opportunities that Japan affords.

There must also be commitment on the part of the marketer. In a marketplace dominated by large domestic brands, the prospect of gaining market share in Japan is daunting. But Beacon Communication executive strategic director Han Van-Dijk hopes to impress on his clients a different mindset: “Clients have to play to win. You don’t come into this market to just compete — that’s how you lose. The products have to be specific for Japan... You have to test, test, test, improve, improve, improve and do it all over again if necessary.”

Ultimately, it is about getting the emotional response that binds the customer to the brand. In that sense, the Japanese market is the same as all others.