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Innovation

## Bully Marketing

Tom Van Riper, 09.20.06, 6:00 AM ET

Subtlety seems to be lost on Madison Avenue, where advertisers have no compunction telling customers to Just Do It, Get Out There, Be Hospitable, Live Richly or Think Different. It's called "didactic marketing," the new industry catchphrase used to describe the dictatorial trend in advertising. For many companies, the soft sell is out. Ordering customers around is in.

Curiously, didactic marketing's new devotees are companies with few if any product or service improvements to showcase. A firm's television, print and Web ads can offer a true look at determining whether it's pushing actual innovations and real competitive advantages or if it's glossing over such details with pointed lifestyle advice. Some of the biggest culprits--Citigroup, Apple Computer, Hilton Hotels and Royal Caribbean Cruises--have lagged the Standard & Poor's 500 index this year.

### In Pictures: Bully Marketing Slogans

"What's going on is spinning the same product attributes in a different way. It's about taking another shot at telling the same old story," says Thomas Ordahl, a partner at marketing and branding specialist Group 1066. Ordahl thinks too many companies are resting on their laurels rather than developing new value propositions for customers.

Once a company's product or service becomes commoditized--often the case with big banks, hotel chains and cruise lines--why not take consumers' minds off those annoying product details and grab their attention with some forceful life advice? If Royal Caribbean can't give people a reason to travel on its cruise ships rather than on **Carnival's**, maybe its best to stir them into action with a drum-banging television spot and scream at them to "Get Out There!"

And how else to explain Citigroup's "Live Richly" campaign, in which the bank opts out of selling potential retail customers specific advantages over the competition, such as free checking, higher-interest CDs or longer hours. Instead, the company essentially undercuts its own business by telling us that the way to live richly is to downplay the role of money. Some don't particularly want that message from their bank.

"When I pick a banker, I want them focused on money. Let *me* worry about how to live richly," says Marc Babej, who runs marketing consultancy Reason Inc. "They're just empty words, and customers know that." (Babej also writes the "[Unsolicited Advice](#)" column on Forbes.com with partner Tim Pollak.)

Meanwhile, in its current ad campaign it launched in February, Hilton Hotels has been ordering viewers to "Be Hospitable." Unlike Wyndham Worldwide, which recently began touting the improved comfort of its hotel beds in its "Heavenly Bed" program, Hilton decided to tweak the natural human instinct of greeting strangers politely during a time, it thinks, when that value has been lost on people during their rushed, technology-driven lives. **Mary Beth Parks**, Hilton's vice president of marketing, defends the program.

"We decided we wanted a call to action, and to do it in a subtle way to give people something to think about," Parks says. "Hopefully, they will associate it with us."

Ordahl believes that strategy, asserting a common value that will supposedly reflect back onto the company, is a desperate attempt to differentiate when you're lacking the goods to stand out from the competition.

"It's a case of the best defense is a good offense," he says of the approach. "It's like, 'Let's keep them from asking too many questions.'"

Some companies have gone the didactic way and returned. About a year ago, Bethpage, N.Y.-based Cablevision engaged in the practice with its "Just Watch Us" campaign, a series of ads that spoofed the growing threat of satellite television. Nowhere in the ads were any claims touting the benefits of cable over satellite. More recently, however, the company has abandoned those spots while boosting its other services, including Optimum Voice phoning and Digital Video Recording options.

But the trend, which has its roots in **Nike's** "Just Do It" campaign that began in the 1980s--a message that marketing experts think makes more sense than most since it suggests that its athletic wear products can help people achieve what they want to do--still has legs. Apple Computer is still telling us to "Think Different." And **Volkswagen** has stretched the concept even further, judging people watching their TV ads to be either "passengers" or "drivers" on the road of life. Their follow-up slogan, "Drivers Wanted," sends the message that anyone who's not an energetic go-getter type isn't welcome in their showrooms.

Chances are, the bully approach will peter out at some point. Advertising history is filled with alternating bursts of hard and soft selling over the years, points out industry author James Twitchell, with the current trend coming on the heels of several years of softer messages focused on entertainment.

"This is probably a way to stand out and take ownership of an edgy stance; the alternative is just more entertainment," says Twitchell, who also teaches advertising at the University of Florida.

In the meantime, a little less preaching and a little more innovating might go a long way toward winning consumers' loyalty, and toward boosting share prices.

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