

Managing Global Marketing Execution: A Core Competency

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Executive Summary

As products, market segments, and marketing messages proliferate globally, marketers face the challenge of how to execute strategies that consistently communicate core product benefits in a manner that reflects local needs, competitive environments, and cultural preferences. What we have found in working with companies on global execution of marketing materials is that the key success factors are:

- Driving execution with a clear communication strategy and brand standards
- Controlling your own brand assets
- Managing a set of internal and external execution resources
- Measuring and auditing the results

Introduction

From the perspective of marketing execution, the trend toward consistent, worldwide communication standards has led to two mutually opposed tendencies:

- **Decentralization**—Relying on local resources for localization services
- **Centralization**—Relying on common brand standards to execute global messaging as part of an integrated communication strategy

We have seen companies go too far in either direction. Those that decentralized their marketing execution often did the following:

- Produced materials with inconsistent branding
- Failed to follow global messaging guidelines, since there was too much of a desire to “be creative” during local execution
- Didn’t effectively reuse materials across different target markets

On the other hand, the companies that fully centralized often did the following:

- Failed to produce messages and images that were suitable for or relevant to the local market
- Paid a higher price for execution than if materials had been produced locally for the local market
- Saw local marketers step outside the company’s official channel to produce marketing materials, since the centralized process was viewed as being too restrictive and protracted

Some companies have followed a third path, relying on an advertising agency network to deliver their messages globally. This experience generally leaves companies with the worst of both worlds: execution costs increase dramatically while the agency network fails to deliver consistently across all

markets due to a lack of adequate management infrastructure, financial incentives, and cooperation among different offices and affiliates of the same agency.

In our experience working with companies on global execution of marketing materials, we've determined that companies can avoid the problems outlined above by pursuing strategies that incorporate the following best practices:

- Driving execution with a clear communication strategy and brand standards
- Controlling your own brand assets
- Managing a set of internal and external execution resources
- Measuring and auditing the results

Driving Execution With a Clear Communication Strategy and Brand Standards

Too often we see a communication strategy being invented (or reinvented) during the execution of marketing materials, which is the wrong time for this. Marketing management must ensure that all execution teams are briefed on the strategy at the start of the process and must insist that one of the criteria used to evaluate deliverables is whether the agreed-upon strategy has been adhered to. By doing these things, the company can ensure that its brand and communication strategy will be reflected in the marketing deliverables. Outsourcing the responsibility for operationalizing strategy to an agency is risky, since external parties tend to rethink execution in a misguided, though well-intentioned, attempt to add more value to the final deliverable.

Execution cannot be expected to occur smoothly and consistently without clearly established corporate brand standards. These standards certainly need to include specifications for logo usage, fonts, color palette, etc., but even more important, they need to specify what is mandatory across all circumstances, where the local markets can choose from a set of preapproved options, and where these markets are free to use their discretion. Striking the right balance between centralized control and decentralized execution allows for communication of global brand values while enabling local marketers to craft messages that will resonate with their particular audiences.

EXAMPLE: GLOBAL ELECTRONICS COMPANY

Situation

- Desire to devote internal resources to development of strategy and high-level creative
- Unwillingness on the part of senior management to authorize any increase in permanent headcount
- Management philosophy of outsourcing most operational aspects of marketing execution
- Corporate mandate to reduce costs through better quality and less rework
- Strong push to reinforce global brand image

Solution

- Developed comprehensive corporate brand identity standards, with guidelines for layout, information hierarchy, photography, copy, font, color, etc.
- Formally trained agencies in brand standards before approving them to work on projects
- Structured meetings and project intake forms used with all groups performing marketing execution to ensure that strategy is properly communicated to those executing against it
- Created brand-standard “help desk,” available for consultation to all those who perform marketing execution, both internal and external
- Made review of initial designs and messages against strategy an integral part of the established execution processes

Results

- Headcount remains steady, even as products and markets proliferate around the globe
- Increase in global consumer awareness of brand
- Close vendor partnerships with marketing execution suppliers, with most marketers in the company positively rating the partnerships

Controlling Your Own Brand Assets

Although the value of doing this is well recognized, many companies fail to store key brand assets centrally. They frequently lack not only an easily accessed electronic system for asset retrieval, but even a physical binder containing their logo files, key marketing messages, approved imagery, and rights to use that imagery. Companies are correct to use the best creative minds available—usually found at agencies—to develop their brand standards, but the company itself needs to be the steward of the brand assets it has bought and paid for.

We’ve seen this lack of asset centralization cause several problems:

- Use of nonapproved assets or assets that are inconsistent with the overall marketing campaign
- Projects started with incorrect assets, resulting in significant rework when the error is discovered, often during a late-stage review session
- Re-creation of assets that were previously developed but now cannot be located
- Inability to rapidly identify whether a piece of marketing material contains approved assets

We believe that centralized control over brand assets facilitates effective decentralized execution. This control can be best achieved by adopting a global system that tracks each asset, its use, its approval history, and the rights the company has to use it.

EXAMPLE: MAJOR CONSUMER PACKAGED GOODS COMPANY

Situation

- Inability to track approved brand packaging assets, the history of their use, or the rights the company has to them
- Excessive rounds of revision in asset approval due to unstructured approval process
- Product launches delayed by cycle time on asset approval
- Significant variation of brand depictions from market to market

Solution

- Centralized database built of all assets used on packaging globally
- Database has workflow tool driving structured reviews for each aspect of the asset (e.g., marketing department reviews marketing copy and imagery, legal department reviews legal copy, packaging engineers review bar codes and die lines)
- All groups, both internal and external, have access to database via an intranet or extranet
- All comments for revision and approvals tracked and identified by approver
- All assets tagged to show where they have been used and the company's rights to use them
- Factory will not produce final package unless asset is approved in the electronic system

Results

- Streamlined processes for asset approval
- Shortened cycle time standards for approval, coordinated with manufacturing and packaging production
- Reduced execution error rates
- Reduced effort on the part of management in asset approval process

Managing a Set of Internal and External Execution Resources

As mentioned above, many companies have had negative experiences when contracting an agency network to perform global execution. The usual model in this scenario is to assign responsibility to a lead agency—in most cases, the brand advertising agency—for the development and coordination of messaging and execution against a common communication strategy; local offices of the lead agency handle execution, while specialty agencies handle direct marketing, online marketing, event marketing, and public relations.

Coordination of numerous agency offices across the globe requires implementation of a strong, centralized management structure with processes and tools, which few agencies are willing or able

to put into place. We believe that companies need to take an active role in managing their roster of agencies rather than fully outsourcing this function.

To manage such multi-agency execution effectively, we find that successful companies do the following:

- Assign the lead agency responsibility for developing concepts, messaging, and a brand strategy that will work globally, and require that agency to deliver brand style guides that can be used around the world
- Develop a strong internal management team to oversee and coordinate the diverse execution resources, both external and internal
- Assign execution-oriented work by selecting from a roster of approved agencies and internal resources, considering the costs, timing, and skills required for each assignment
- Maintain and manage a master schedule, ensuring that execution across all resources (both internal and external) is coordinated

EXAMPLE: MAJOR PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY

Situation

- Excessive costs charged by external agencies, selected globally on a brand basis, to perform execution work
- Inconsistent levels of service across different offices of global agencies, resulting in missed deadlines for final production of marketing materials
- Local marketers flouting official procedures to avoid problems with approved agencies
- Relationships developed with local agencies that violate corporate procurement guidelines
- Radically different approaches to execution in different regions of the world, with no sharing of internal best practices

Solution

- Selected a roster of approved agencies by region, supplemented by internal resources in markets that had a large enough volume to justify an internal group
- Negotiated prices centrally with agency networks to maximize impact of buying power
- Used agencies to develop concepts and then built upon those concepts internally
- For execution-oriented work done externally, placed a premium on matching provider specialty with required task (e.g., local translation services, event-management firms)
- Fully documented internal versus external costs to create incentives that would drive the internal group to achieve execution-oriented work
- Managed internal resources around the global from a central location, facilitating knowledge sharing and materials reuse (e.g., same video used with different voice-overs in different markets)

Results

- Significantly lower cost resulting from pulling large amounts of execution-oriented work away from external agencies and doing the work in-house
- Greater flexibility in execution options offered to local marketers
- Greater compliance with official execution procedures, leading to increased compliance with brand standards

Measuring and Auditing the Results

When the goal is execution against an established communication strategy and brand standards, the results need to be monitored to ensure that execution is actually happening according to plan. The challenge to accomplishing this on a global scale is in ensuring that the approval processes put in place to monitor brand consistency are not so rigorous or onerous as to negatively affect cycle times.

We recommend that companies have a centralized organization review all new marketing communication concepts wherever they may be produced. These approved concepts should be modified locally, as should all modifications. Periodic global brand audits can highlight which parts of an organization are good at adhering to brand standards and which require more attention from management for improvement in this area.

EXAMPLE: LEADING COMPUTER MANUFACTURING & SERVICES COMPANY

Situation

- Decentralized marketing silos in the organization, with a focus on product-based messaging at the expense of maintaining brand standards
- No mechanism to avoid conflicting and/or overlapping messages and differing representations of the brand between product lines
- No corporate-level measurement of execution processes or agency performance

Solution

- Created global review committee to serve as a clearinghouse for all new materials produced worldwide, without reviewing every iteration of every campaign
- Every user in the company or an external agency is polled to assess the quality of agency support and the work being produced
- Recognized quality of work and business impact as critical factors in evaluating the external providers

Results

- Full compliance with brand standards

- Cost reduction as a result of central review that eliminated conflicting and/or overlapping messages in media vehicles
- Evaluations of agency work turned into continuous agency improvement program linked to agency compensation

Conclusion

Global execution of marketing materials is critical for effectively disseminating marketing messages and building brand equity. Given the importance of these functions, we strongly recommend that clients take an active role in managing global marketing execution. Using external vendors is a critical aspect of execution; however, such vendors should be used only in the areas in which they specialize, and it is always the client's responsibility to ensure that local execution is driven by approved communication, brand strategy, and brand standards. Ultimately, it is a balancing act between complete central control and complete decentralization. Striking the right balance is critical to the success of marketing campaigns and the effective investment of marketing dollars.

About Aquent

Aquent pairs marketing and design specialists with challenging jobs to create inspired, productive partnerships that produce meaningful work for our client companies and the talent we represent. We're a world-leading innovator in improving the way companies, and talent, work.

Our agents are organized into four specialized practice areas: Marketing, Online Marketing, Graphic Design, and Interactive Design, each with a practice leader who's a senior expert in that space. Practice leaders bring on agents who have complementary expertise so that as a team they can cover every type of work done in that practice area.

This level of specialization provides a significant advantage to our clients and talent. When you talk to an agent who specializes in your exact field, she or he will not only understand your needs and concerns, but also will be able to provide valuable context based on what is working these days for other people in similar situations.

Learn more at **[aquent.com](https://www.aquent.com)**.