BUYER HOT BUTTONS

Motivations can be categorized as important or unimportant, yet the dynamics of the market may be better captured by identifying current buyer hot buttons. Hot buttons are motivations whose salience and impact on markets are significant and growing. What are buyers talking about? What are stimulating changes in buying decisions and use patterns?

In consumer retail food products, for example, hot buttons include the following:

- **Freshness and naturalness.** Grocery stores have responded with salad bars, packaged precut vegetables, and efforts to upgrade the quality and selection of their fresh produce.
- **Healthy eating.** Low fat, particularly saturated and trans fat, is a prime driver, but concern about sodium, sugar, and processed foods is also growing and affecting product offerings in most food categories.
- **Ethnic eating.** A growing interest in ethnic flavors and cooking such as Asian, Mediterranean, and Caribbean cuisines has led to an explosion of new offerings. Brands usually start in ethnic neighborhoods, move into natural-food and gourmet stores, and finally reach the mainstream markets.
- **Gourmet eating.** The success of Williams-Sonoma and similar retailers reflects the growth of gourmet cooking and has led to the introduction of a broader array of interesting cooking aids and devices.
- **Meal solutions.** The desire for meal solutions has led to groups of products being bundled together as a meal and to a host of carryout prepared foods offered by both grocery stores and restaurants.
- **Low-carb foods.** The influence of low-carb diets has created a demand for reduced-carb food variants in both grocery stores and restaurants.
- **Convenience.** Shoppers have taken convenience to a new level with frozen dinners and cake mixes and even canned soup considered to demand too much preparation. Open and eat is the key. Snacks and yogurt deliver.

price? The trade-off question asks customers to make difficult judgments about attributes. Another approach is to see which judgments are associated with actual purchase decisions. Such an approach revealed that mothers often selected snack food based on what "the child likes" and what was "juicy" instead of qualities they had said were important (nourishing, easy to eat).

A fourth task is to identify the motivations that will play a role in defining the value proposition of the business. The selection of motivations central to strategy will depend on customer motivations and other factors, such as competitors' strategies that emerge in the competitor analysis. Another factor is how feasible and practical the resulting strategy is for the business. Internal analysis will be involved in making that determination, as will an analysis of the strategy's implementation.

Changing Customer Priorities

It is particularly critical to gain insight into changes in customers' priorities. In the high-tech area, customer priorities often evolve from needing help in selecting and installing the right equipment

to wanting performance to looking for low cost. In the coffee business, customer tastes and habits have evolved from buying coffee at grocery stores to drinking coffee at gourmet cafés to buying and brewing their own whole-bean gourmet coffees. Assuming that customer priorities are not changing can be risky. It is essential to ask whether a significant and growing segment has developed priorities that are different from the basic business model.

The Customer as Active Partner

Customers are increasingly becoming active partners in their relationship with the firm and brand rather than passive targets of product development and advertising. The trend is illustrated by patients taking control of medical issues, the control of media shifting as audiences move to DVRs such as TiVo, and the power-enhancing access to information and fellow customers provided by the Internet.

To harness this change, managers should create and support customer communities. One motivation is to hear customer experiences and opinions about a brand in a context that will engender unbiased, motivated thoughts. Interacting with the customer on the Internet requires skills in listening, engaging, and leading. Each has challenges. Often there is information overload. There is a mention of McDonald's on the Internet every 5 seconds or so. Software to summarize content can play a role if integrated into an information system. Engaging can be difficult because it depends on where the firm has permission to enter the space, and there can be risks of a misstatement or inflaming an issue if it is engaged. However, clearly identified firm spokespeople can be effective. Leading usually requires getting in front of the Internet discussion with products or programs.

UNMET NEEDS

An unmet need is a customer need that is not satisfied by existing product offerings. OfficeMax, for example, found that people, especially women professionals, wanted a cubicle workplace with color, patterns, and textures. The result was four product lines that promised to enliven and personalize cubicle environments delivered under the tagline "Life Is Beautiful, Work Can Be Too." An unmet need provided not only a route to a successful offering, but also a way to enhance a brand relationship.

Unmet needs are strategically important because they represent opportunities for firms to increase their market share, break into a market, or create and own new markets. They can also represent threats to established firms in that they can be a lever that enables competitors to disrupt an established position. Ariat, for example, broke into the market for equestrian footwear by providing high-performance athletic footwear to riders who were not well served by traditional riding boots. Driven by the belief that riders are athletes, Ariat developed a brand and product line that was responsive to an unmet need.

Sometimes customers may not be aware of their unmet needs because they are so accustomed to the implicit limitations of existing equipment. Who could have conceived of a need for an electric lightbulb or a tractor before technology made them possible? Unmet needs that are not obvious may be more difficult to identify, but they can also represent a greater opportunity for an aggressive business because there will be little pressure on established firms to be responsive. The key is to stretch the technology or apply new technologies in order to expose unmet needs.