

How Three Collaboration Trends are Reshaping Marketing *What every marketing leader needs to know*

By Mike Gospe

Much has changed over the past five years, but one thing that hasn't is our need to work more collaboratively with our teams and business partners inside and outside the organization. I've had the opportunity to work with some of the best global 500 companies as well as some exciting up-and-coming start-ups and mid-size companies. What sets these businesses apart are how they have each embraced and nurtured a new set of collaboration techniques that allow them to be closer to the customer and globally aligned in their operations.

Trend #1: Customer Advisory Boards – the New Executive Collaboration Tool

Five years ago Customer Advisory Boards programs, or CABs, could be found only in the most elite and forward-looking companies. In fact, the CAB program wasn't really a program at all. Each CAB meeting was likely run as a discreet opportunity to interact with customers. As one executive once told me, "The success of the meeting could be directly related to the size of the shrimp that was served at lunch." It was all about the flair and not about the substance. Nowadays, not only have CAB programs been reinvented, they have become a common staple for any aggressive business working to outdistance its competition. What's changed?

Today, it's all about finding new ways to collaborate with customers. In short, ***the strategy is the relationship***. Leading companies today, regardless of their size, understand that the one who best understands its customer wins. As we look ahead to the next five years, CABs will continue to grow in popularity as an important tool in the marketing arsenal for establishing customer loyalty and nurturing an on-going dialog with your most strategic customers.

Some CAB trends that we will see in the next five years include:

- **Customer collaboration strategies will be included in a company's annual planning process.** More and more companies and executives will take the time to build a strategy for collaborating with customers not just to sell them products directly, but to better understand what makes them tick. The CAB, as well as other voice-of-the-customer programs, will be a key ingredient.
- **CABs will no longer be treated as just "another event" in the marketing line up.** A complete CAB program has its own lifecycle, from the CEO's invitation to the customer to participate, to the development of some simple bylaws and an engagement model to run the program, to setting the agendas for semi-annual board meetings, to the event follow-up to keep the connection going long after the meeting is over.
- **Great CAB meetings are run by a professional facilitator.** When CAB meetings fail it is typically because they are poorly executed. Common customer complaints include: the CMO or VP facilitating the event carried his or her own agenda (consciously or unconsciously), or the company executives felt they needed to defend every comment made by customers who offered a differing perspective, or the meeting was lopsided with one or two customers doing all the talking. All of these failings can be easily addressed by using a professional facilitator familiar with your business and customers. The cost of a poorly run CAB is very high: Customers won't return.

In summary, the executive leaders you are selling to don't want to be sold to. They want to be collaborated with. Those companies, whether Fortune 500, mid-size, or start-up, that can foster a professional, unique, collaboration model will win the hearts and minds of their customers and put a competitive wedge against the competition.

Trend #2: Virtual Global Teams – How Executives are Rewriting the Ways Global Teams Interact

A challenge for companies of any size is in knowing how and when to best engage their global team. The 1980s and 1990s saw a lot of emphasis on “think globally, execute locally” but the collaboration model was lacking or inconsistent. This continues to be a challenge today, but some companies have found a way to accelerate their success by reinventing the way global team members interact and collaborate. Here are two examples:

Case study: Architecting a global integrated campaign development process

A large software company with a global marketing team of more than 700 needed to reinvent the way they developed and executed integrated marketing campaigns. The challenge was compounded by silos existing within headquarters, as well as the regions. The solution was to re-architect the campaign development process so that it encouraged collaboration at every stage. Overseen by a newly appointed campaign manager, a global marketing team was formed around each campaign. The teams then followed a well-structured engagement model which included kickoff meetings, global and functional synchronization meetings, and steering committee review sessions to address the strategic and creative differences that were pertinent to each region. To emphasize the new process to its fullest, the company planned a 3-½ day practical application workshop that included 80 representatives from all the regions. Some of the key benefits of this new collaborative process included:

- An integrated marketing plan produced and agreed to by the global team, not just an individual residing at headquarters.
- An escalation path expedited the resolution of sticky issues as well as the ultimate approval and endorsement from an executive steering committee.
- Synergies and gaps were identified in this process so better global and local resource allocation decisions could be made.

Articulating a new charter for a Worldwide Education team

Another example of collaboration techniques in action was when a new worldwide education team was formed within another high-tech company. In this case, a restructuring resulted in a new VP overseeing two previously separate education teams. With these two teams coming together to form one, there was an opportunity to bring all the team leaders together to craft a new mission and charter statement, as well as to prioritize their central objectives and operating principles.

In patriarchal companies of the past, this type of activity was often prescribed by the VP who would set the tone and the rules, and the team members were expected to fall in line. However, the new VP and senior directors opted for a more collaborative approach that would encourage the team leaders to participate and take an active ownership in the outcome. During the day-and-a-half workshop conducted offsite, representatives from the global team gathered to work the issues. The benefits from this approach included:

- Team members who rarely saw each other had the opportunity to work face-to-face.
- The real-time collaborative exercises produced a 360 degree view of the education opportunities
- Real-time decisions were made to prioritize programs and develop a 30 day action plan, including how the teams would work more effectively together.

Global collaboration trend: Companies will be more willing to invest the time and resources required to allow global team members to come together to work the process, not just produce a specific output. By addressing the larger engagement issue in a practical, pragmatic way, this type of investment will continue to pay dividends and improve employee moral.

Trend #3: New collaborative tools and technologies are changing the way companies interact with the public

We all have a huge appetite for information. We not only want to learn, we want to share. So, it's no surprise that websites like Myspace and YouTube have become a big hit. One has only to look at the creative videos people have produced with or for political candidates for the 2008 presidential elections to see the impact these tools will have on our culture. But what does this trend mean for business?

It means marketers have many more channel segments to consider in our marketing mix. This is clearly an opportunity for marketing leaders to develop a clever, engaging, integrated marketing campaign.

Some trends we expect include:

- Companies will continue to embrace online collaborative tools such as Citrix's GotoMeeting – an online service that allows teams to share information and collaborate online in real time.
- Comment-less blogs will disappear due to non-use. However, well-designed interactive blogs and forums for user groups and larger communities that are actively managed and are easy to navigate will deliver an even richer experience.
- With more and more people accessing the Internet through mobile devices, marketers will need to create content that can be optimized for cell phones and PDAs. It's no longer a one-size-fits-all on the Internet.
- Companies will take advantage of YouTube and other online sites to produce and offer messages that inform as well as entertain their audiences. Some of these "video shorts" (short films) will form a sort of viral marketing that creates a cult-like following for a product, services, or technology.

In summary, the next five years will see people create new and different ways of working together. Collaboration is the key to building stronger business relationships with customers and among employees. To find out more about the best practices and trends discussed in this article, please contact Mike Gospe at mikeg@kickstartall.com.