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Monday, Nov 24, 2003

Business

Posted on Mon, Nov. 24, 2003

BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT: Marketing maven asks: Why do people buy stuff they don't need?

MICHAEL RUBINKAM
Associated Press

STEVENS, Pa. - Amish country is the last place you'd expect to find someone like Pam Danziger, an expert at getting people to buy things they don't need.

But there she is, on the second floor of a nondescript office building across the street from a farmer's field, conducting research that seeks to unlock the mysteries of the consumer mind.

It's her job to figure out what retailers across the nation are itching to know: Namely, why DO people buy stuff they don't need? And how can we get them to buy OUR stuff?

These questions are especially pertinent this time of year, with Black Friday only days away and retailers hoping for a good year after several bad ones.

Danziger's insights help companies sell jewelry, candles, home decor and other things that people don't especially need, but might want. Her customers have run the gamut, from Sears and Target to Mattel and Hasbro, from Hallmark Cards and American Greetings to Lenox and Waterford Crystal.

Maxine Clark, who founded Build-A-Bear Workshop, a St. Louis-based retail chain where children (and their parents) create their own stuffed animals, incorporated some of Danziger's market research into her own business plan. Clark, former president of Payless ShoeSource, says she found the consultant to be "in synch with the consumer" and thus a credible source of information.

"Why people buy things they don't need is because of the way you market it, position it, make it fit their lifestyle. Nobody needs anything anymore, so how do you make it something they want?" Clark says.

That's where Danziger comes in.

Danziger, 50, a plainspoken woman with a hearty laugh, studies consumers of luxury items as an ornithologist might examine a bird in flight. Like birds, consumers tend to change direction quickly. Retailers who don't understand that are destined to fail, stuck with products that people no longer want, she says.

Yet many business executives are reluctant to switch gears, especially if what they are doing has worked well in the past.

"The clients that I work with are very left brain-oriented, they are very rational, they make decisions based upon reason," she says. "They don't really understand that when consumers are in the store, when consumers are shopping, they're not driven by reason at all. It's totally emotion. It's all about the feelings."

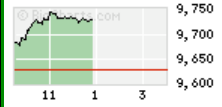
Consumers often make a snap decision to buy something and then feel compelled to rationalize the purchase, Danziger says. In her 2002 book "Why People Buy Things They Don't Need," she identifies 14 such "justifiers" and advises retailers to lure consumers with emotion, then "close the deal" by creating a rationale for the purchase.

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All of this is a bit much for sociologist George Ritzer, co-founding editor of the Journal of Consumer Culture and author of "The McDonaldization of Society," who says consultants such as Danziger are contributing to the "endless treadmill of consumption."

"Getting somebody to consume more things they don't need is, to me, reprehensible," he says.

But Danziger is unrepentant. She points out that in the days following the Sept. 11 attacks, President Bush said Americans should continue to shop and travel as much as possible.

"I'm of the point of view that a free-market society is the only way that we're going to grow," she says. "People need to do with their money what they want."

She finds out what they want through focus groups. Danziger moderates them herself, asking consumers about their preferences, their habits, their future buying plans. She then formulates a hypothesis about the direction of a particular luxury market, poll-tests it, and then incorporates it into a report that she sells to retailers.

Danziger, who worked at the Franklin Mint before starting Unity Marketing a dozen years ago, says the era of "cocooning," in which people focused on home and hearth and bought things "to fill up the emotional empty spaces," is over, replaced by what she calls the "butterfly consumer," who seeks to connect with the outside world and experience new things.

Thus, travel will be hot, collectibles not - something that her former employer, the Franklin Mint, failed to realize, Danziger says. Earlier this month, the prominent collectibles maker announced plans to lay off two-thirds of its employees.

"The conventional wisdom of market research is you don't have to ask why consumers buy. All you have to do is study their behavior, see what they did in the past, and then you can project and predict the future," Danziger says.

"But what I discovered was that if you study past consumer behavior, all you're going to know about is the past. You really have to touch and feel them, you really have to understand them because that's who you are trying to sell to."

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