

Tabletop Companies: Are You Tapping into the Consumers' Passion?

By Pam Danziger, Unity Marketing

During research consumers keep telling me that today's fine traditional tabletop is irrelevant to their lives. Irrelevancy — the state of not “having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand” — is about being insignificant, immaterial, extraneous, unconnected to the consumer and their lifestyle. For a marketer, what could be worse?

A recent focus group respondent in our luxury market study expressed the majority opinion on tabletop this way: “You get married and you pick what you want. Then you put it away and use it once a year. I was all excited when I got it, but then it fades.” So for a brief snapshot of time in this consumer's life, fine tabletop is relevant, important and meaningful, but then it fades into irrelevancy.

Of course not all luxury consumers viewed fine china as irrelevant. There was a minority who described fine china, crystal and flatware as their passion. They set their table every day and owned multiple full 12-piece sets of different patterns. One woman shared that she had different patterns she used daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But for most of these high-income women living in high-value homes, they felt no emotional connection with fine china.

Because we all prepare and eat food as a necessity of life, it is hard to imagine that dinnerware, a product that facilitates the experience of dining, should be considered irrelevant. So how can marketers of fine tabletop, dinnerware, crystal and flatware, become relevant again to the consumers' lives? It's simple...they need to target the consumers' passion.

But the consumers' passion for dinnerware is not really about the thing itself, rather for most consumers their passion for dinnerware is connected to their experience using the dinnerware and their joy and pleasure in dining. This consumer-centric point of view distinguishes market driven companies from those that are product driven. The winners in the tabletop market in the future will be those who connect with the consumers' passion.

As an industry, most tabletop marketers remain product-focused which inevitably leads to irrelevancy. Let me share an example of what I mean. I recently saw a release about a new product line being introduced by a very well respected and upscale U.K.-based china company. They just announced the “ultimate British dinner service,” designed in “Classical British Empire” style with a five-piece place setting starting at only \$1,400. Now how many Americans do you think are passionate to buy this homage to British colonialism? Maybe two! This is a completely product-centric line with no relevance to the U.S. consumer market.

Compare that with Vietri *Cucina Fresca* line they import from Italy. This hardy collection of ceramic dinnerware in earth tones evokes olive trees, grape vines and summer evenings in Rome. Their line enhances the experience of eating and serving simple, but wonderful peasant Italian food, a la Mario Batali.

In order for tabletop marketers to prosper in the years ahead, they must understand this new emphasis: from selling a thing (e.g. plate, glass, dish) to delivering an experience (e.g. enhancing the consumers' pleasure and enjoyment in dining). What a dramatic difference it will make to the \$8 billion tabletop industry when we realize the products we sell are ultimately just the means to an end for the consumer and that end is a feeling. It's not about the patterns, designs,

styles....It's about enhancing the dining experience. Speaking about his cosmetics business, Charles Revson, founder of Revlon, explained the difference between selling a thing and delivering an experience best: "In the factory we make cosmetics, but in my stores we sell hope."

Developing a sensitivity to experiential marketing is more than just turning product features into benefits. It's looking at the world, and your products, totally from the consumers' point of view. The future focus for all aspects of consumer behavior will be about achieving an experience, so manufacturers and marketers must think beyond the thing they are selling to how that thing creates, supports or enhances an experience.

Steps tabletop companies need to take to connect with the consumer's passion and enhance the experience:

- **Make the product work for the consumer, not the consumer work for the product**

American consumers today are time-starved and are constantly looking for new products to bring into their home that will save them time and effort. A recent survey by ACNielsen found that more than half of American consumers are not willing to put much time or effort into meal preparation. Dinnerware or crystal that must be hand washed or flatware that needs polishing doesn't fit into that scenario. To be relevant to the consumer, their choice for tabletop has to support their lifestyle. Dishes that can't be thrown in the dishwasher or go into the microwave and then look good enough to display on the shelf just don't fit consumers' fast-paced, multitasking lifestyles. The brilliance of Crate and Barrel and Pottery Barn is that they offer nicely styled products at an affordable price that make it easy for the consumer to set a nice table, then clean up afterwards. That's a winning combination today.

- **It's not about casual, it's about live-ability**

There is a lot of confusion in our industry about the trend toward "casual" — that consumers are turning to a more casual lifestyle, so formal dinnerware is out. But by focusing on casual designs, we are focusing on the wrong thing. Consumers want tabletop that is appropriate to the occasion, sometimes they want a casual feel, but other times they want something more formal. But a formal design can be livable and functional. In effect, it needs to deliver a formal look but be designed for a casual lifestyle, with all that implies. One consumer in a recent focus group expressed it this way, "I don't want my guests to feel responsible for a \$1,000 place setting. We went to an outlet and I bought 16 place settings of Mikasa. It eats good, tastes good, but it doesn't have to be the best." Notice the verbs she uses to describe her china...that's experiential!

- **One-size fits all doesn't work anymore, the market is going niche**

Time was the American consumer market was homogenous, with consumers pretty much alike in their tastes and needs. But that has totally changed. Not only is the basic demographic makeup of the culture shifting with the dynamic growth of different ethnic and racially defined market segments, each with their own unique cultural experiences and expectations linked to dining. Today the American marketplace is diverging and polarizing at two ends of the spectrum. At the luxury end, there are the 76 million strong baby-boom population, ages 38 to 57 this year, entering their "empty-nesting" life stage that corresponds with increased luxury spending. At the economy end of the market is the emerging millennial generation, the 71 million 'babies' of the baby-boomers now reaching age 26 which is associated with first marriage and the family formation life stage. More and more marketers and retailers are going to find their best

opportunities are targeting either the high-end or the economy, budget end of the market. The middle market, on the other hand, will offer fewer and fewer growth opportunities in the future. Tabletop marketers have got to slice and dice their target consumer markets into smaller and smaller niche segments in order to send a relevant message that captures their attention. Let's face it, the high-end formal china market today reflects the world view of 18th century British aristocracy. It just isn't relevant to today's Latina bride.

- **Understand why people buy your brand so you connect with consumers emotionally**

In closing the most fundamental thing all consumer marketers need to understand is why people buy their product and their brand. Unlike consumer behavior, e.g. the what, where, how much of buying, which is rationally-oriented and changes under different circumstances and at different life stages, the why underlying consumers' desire and passion doesn't change. Consumers buy things to achieve a feeling, to enhance an experience, to get an emotional lift, to fulfill a fantasy. Your company's brand conveys a promise to the consumer that the product will satisfy their emotional desire. The 'why' is the contract with the consumer, the agreement that binds the brand with the consumer. If tabletop marketers don't intimately understand why people buy their brand, then it is only hit and miss that the brand will connect with the consumer. Ultimately to tap the consumers' passion, they need to dig deep into the consumers' psyche to understand their emotional dreams and desires, then deliver that to the consumers.

About Pam Danziger and Unity Marketing

Founded in 1992, Unity Marketing (www.unitymarketingonline.com) is a marketing research and consulting firm that specializes in consumer insights for luxury marketers. Using its proprietary "why people buy" strategy, Pam Danziger, company founder and author of *Why People Buy Things They Don't Need* (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing, 2002), uncovers the motivations, desires and emotional needs that drive consumers to buy. Unity also publishes market research studies on the luxury market, art, jewelry, home furnishings, gifts and collectibles, personal care markets, as well as the *Luxury Business* newsletter. Pam is currently working on her next book, *Let Them Eat Cake: Marketing Luxury to the Masses (as well as the Classes)*, to be published early in 2004.