

# Marketing doesn't operate in a vacuum

Literally! You may remember a few months back I bought a Bissell vacuum, basically because price being equal, I believed its tagline: Bissell means clean. Well, my experience has proven otherwise. The vacuum is hard to handle and seems to have lost suction power already. Based on this experience, I'd be hard pressed to recommend Bissell. Which leads me to my topic—marketing should be more than great taglines and fun ads. It should be more than a great media relations campaign or unified branding. It should be about products and services that are good, that work as described, that do offer the goods. Unfortunately, many times marketing DOES operate in a vacuum. Marketing people are relegated to their offices, and most of their dealings are with agencies and other marketing affiliates. How many marketing people actually visit a production line or test a product? I would bet not many. Sometimes, marketing people are the last to know about changes or production timetables. Years ago, when I worked at an ad agency in Boston, we had put together a media buy for the launch of a laptop computer. Guess what? The computer was not going to be available by the time the ads were scheduled to run. That hurt both the agency and the product. We had to scramble to change or cancel buys, and the media weren't too terribly impressed by our client.

In a sense, companies undervalue their marketing departments, but marketing departments sometimes are not quick enough to get involved with the overall operations of a company. I am sure Bissell loves its tagline—its great after all. But the truth is that marketing something that doesn't deliver its promise is a mistake. In my case, Bissell means not so clean. There is a saying, the proof is in the pudding. Let's make sure the pudding is always really yummy (and preferably

chocolate).

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# Perception, perception, perception.

Marketing is all about creating perception. We use ads, public relations, coupons, whatever, to shape the public's perception of our product or service. Take for instance Geico. How do you perceive the insurer, which started life as the Government Employees Insurance Company? Chances are you think of them as cheap insurance. Why? Because for years they have been using the tagline "15 minutes could save you 15% or more." They also use a humorous approach to make them seem accessible. (I do love the new James Lipton commercial, where he "interviews" a "real" Geico customer.)

OK. So not all perception is accurate. Giant, a supermarket here in the mid-Atlantic, runs an ad campaign that makes it seem that Giant is the place to get everything you need and save money. So not true. Many products at Giant are more expensive than elsewhere. This is where marketers can get into trouble, or where we see a disconnect between a marketing department and an operations department. The marketers are being told go out and make it look like we offer great deals on a great selection of food. Yet price points are really high for many items.

In Washington, yesterday and today, the hoopla is all about Scott McClellan's new book, "What Happened." Why? Because McClellan, who was press secretary for Bush, and who was in charge of shaping the public's perception about issues such as the Iraq war, has turned. The book is highly critical of Bush

and his advisers, and claims they actively used him to deceive the American public. There is a perception problem though—why should we believe McClellan now? What is motivating him to come out against Bush (to whom he was loyal for years) NOW? In fact, the press does not seem to know what to make of this. I saw Martha Raddatz interview McClellan last night on ABC News and she asked him point blank if he thought the Bush White House were liars. He stopped short of saying that. What McClellan has to contend with is that he is perceived as a spinner. In fact, Martha called him on it—telling him he was spinning! It was unbelievable. Read the transcript [here](#).

So there is often a gap to bridge between the truth and perception. In public affairs, if the bridge is shaky, the public will find out eventually. I think this is the case here. All governments spin the facts. That is a fact. But not all governments take the country to war. The truth is yet to be told, and the perception about the Iraq war has been crumbling for a while. Will Scott McClellan's book bring this bridge down completely? I am not sure. Like I said before, he has a perception problem himself. Reporters don't trust him. Dana Milbank (whose commentary I think is somewhat juvenile) pokes fun at McClellan in today's Washington Post. It will play out eventually. Stay tuned.