

Commentary

Citibank Needs More Than A Catchy Phrase

Robert Passikoff, Nov 28, 2008 05:00 AM

Citibank started its generally meaningless "Live Richly" advertising campaign in 2001. The campaign strategy was to urge customers to not work hard, not consider money to be all that important, and to find meaning and value in their lives through relationships with loved ones, rather than through conspicuous consumption.

A few years later, that campaign was largely superseded by a new "flavor of the month" campaign revolving around identity theft. Remember identify theft? When that didn't work, they resorted to things like online bill-pay "instant win" games.

In April 2007, after months of research, the bank settled on the "Let's Get It Done" theme--a strategy that it hoped would get customers to use more of Citi's services to get "it" done and a rallying cry for employees to get behind the bank's apparent turnaround. After a two-month \$30 million advertising flight, the strategy did not, in fact, get "it" done for the bank.

And so, after nearly three decades in mothballs, and more than \$451 million in brand advertising in 2007, Citigroup is resurrecting the theme "The Citi Never Sleeps," the campaign that was used to usher in the original ATM and 24-hour banking.

But as anyone who watches the news or reads the papers knows, Citigroup's troubles are somewhat larger than their ill-conceived advertising strategies. According to the most recent Customer Loyalty Engagement Index, Citi ranks last among some formidable competitors. Rankings are as follows:

1. Bank of America
2. JP Morgan Chase
3. Wachovia
4. PNC/Bank of NY
5. Wells Fargo
6. Washington Mutual
7. Citi

In addition to a general lack of meaning or differentiation among consumers, and loan problems contributing to about \$20 billion in losses, the bank apparently has problems in integrating the many pieces of the company that were sutured together over the last couple of decades. And with investors battering Citibank's shares (close to \$2 last week), the government stepped in Sunday night with a plan to rescue what was once the nation's most powerful bank.

Financial experts have suggested that it would not be surprising to see a public backlash emerge over the rescue plan, specifically in requiring neither a change in top management nor the sale of parts of the bank and for privatizing profits made from the bank's high-risk bets, but placing losses

on the taxpayers' shoulders. All of this will require real and actionable engagement with the brand - something beyond an expensive new advertising campaign.

Yes, "the Citi never sleeps." And now you know what's keeping it up at night.