

## Strategic alignment and the art of co-creation

By ANTOINETTE ALEXANDER

The best partnerships involve transparent storytelling and the freedom to have risky conversations. Call it “co-creation.” It is the way leading retailers and CPG companies are working together today to identify and leverage the unique hidden assets of their brands, and build a business plan around agile and transparent collaboration.

To take marketing professionals on a journey of the co-creation process, what it means and why it’s critical to joint business planning, industry leaders Shannon Curtin, GMM and VP of beauty, personal care and seasonal at Walgreens, and Dan Mack, founder and managing director of strategic sales and consulting firm Mack Elevation Forum, co-hosted, “Elevating Customer Engagement through Co-Creation,” a key part of the educational lineup, here Wednesday, at the annual Shopper Marketing Expo.

Why co-creation? Because it enables marketers to answer a critical question and face the biggest threat to future growth. “If your brand was delisted today,” Curtin posited, “would anyone care? Would your customer care? Co-creation creates care, and care creates long-term revenue potential. Without care, brands do not survive.”

What is it and what does it look like? Co-creation is a total process that starts with something the pair described as “relevant innovation” — identifying something that is missing from the marketplace — and then creating a solution to satisfy it.

“Co-creation is not just about shopper marketing, and it is certainly not about just creating new products. It is about everything,” Mack explained. “Co-creation is about ideas. It is about assets.”

“Co-creation is not a technique; it really is a

philosophy and it is part of your identity as a company if you do it well,” he added.

And at the heart of the process is an honesty that leaves the retailer and the brand free to author the customer experience together. An open mind is critical, but just as critical is the ability to come up with fresh ideas and bring new, emerging insights to the table that help unlock value for the customer. “The best partnerships include transparent storytelling where both parties are invited to participate. It is about storytelling and asking someone to come into your story,” said Mack. “When a retailer and a manufacturer do that well they create solutions together for the consumer.”

In order to win with co-creation, manufacturers must work to overcome the blind spots that can hinder strategic alignment with retailers, compromising the effectiveness of those engagements and hampering brand growth. Mack categorized the blind spots into three buckets:

- Overestimating yourself and your assets;
- Underestimating the competition; and
- A lack of transparency and effective communication.

“Those three things are big, ... but the key is how do you be relevant, how do you be valuable and drive change and be a transformational organization?” Mack said.

Being transformative is another critical element of successful co-creation. Unlike change, Curtin explained, transformation is intentional; it is a choice to do something different. “The intentional choices that you make will move you from that really good company that you are today to the really great one that you aspire to be,” Curtin said.

Co-creation with its vendor partners is an important growth factor for Walgreens, said Curtin,



Shannon Curtin and Dan Mack

who provided attendees with a powerful example of how the retailer partnered with one small brand to help unilaterally grow the business. That brand, “Yes To,” is no longer a small brand by any stretch of the imagination.

More than six years ago, Yes To brands founder Ido Leffler met with Walgreens with a mission: To sell his line of skin and hair care products in Walgreens. Intrigued by the unique offering and Leffler’s passion, Walgreens agreed to become the brand’s first retail partner and worked with Leffler exclusively for nearly a year to help build the brand and grow the business.

Today, the brand “is in more than 20 countries and is the second-largest natural brand in this space, and he has done that in less than 10 years,” she added.

At the end of day, what’s important to remember is that, while there may be a basic blueprint for co-creation, it is important for brands to let their identify shine through in their engagements with retailers, Mack admonished. “It is a combination of blending both strategy and art — finding that radical middle between the right and left brain,” he said.

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