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A new brand of marketing strategy

Talking With Peter Rogovin

Pleasantville resident's company helps businesses attract and keep customers

By ALLAN DRURY
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PLEASANTVILLE - As a brand strategy consultant, Peter Rogovin and his four employees at Next Level Strategic Marketing Group help companies choose the way they market themselves to consumers.

That meant telling the Pathmark supermarket chain that if it was going to market its stores as convenient places to shop, it needed to stop placing bins of product in the aisles. Though the products in the bins were usually good sellers, the bins caused traffic jams for customers pushing carriages, the company advised.

It also meant telling a cable television provider to scrap its plan to try to lure customers by boasting that it offered more channels and a clearer signal than a competitor. Next Level told the company that customers weren't going to switch cable providers just to get a few extra channels and a slightly better signal.

Next Level, which Rogovin founded in 2004, usually starts its work for a client by analyzing its market. That may mean suggesting that the company conduct a poll or convene focus groups. Next Level does not do the polling or organize focus groups but can tell the client what questions need to be asked.

Sometimes Next Level consultants pose as customers or prospective customers of a client just to gauge the quality of the service.



Tom Nycz / The Journal News

"We'll do a lot of walk-throughs," said Rogovin, 40. "For example, if we're working for Bell Canada (a phone company) we would call them up and try to order a service just to see what the service is like. When we did work for Pathmark we spent a lot of time in the stores. Is the store clean? Is the signage easy to read? What's the overall experience like there?"

Next Level is a private company and doesn't disclose its finances. But Rogovin said the company had revenues of more than \$1 million last year and he thinks Next Level can have \$5 million in sales and eight to 10 consultants in two to four years.

Peter Rogovin

Title: Managing Director of Next Level Strategic Marketing Group

Education: Bachelor degree in economics from Brandeis University; master in business administration from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University

Residence: Pleasantville

Age: 40

Personal: Married, one child

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The amount Next Level charges a company for its services depends on the amount of work that needs to be done. Rogovin said the middle of the range is \$150,000 to \$500,000.

The company's clients have included Frito-Lay, Deutsche Bank, Kenmore and Whirlpool Corp.

Rogovin, who grew up in Queens, started his business after having worked for a pair of consulting firms and in marketing and brand management for Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. of White Plains.

He said he started Next Level because he knew that if he ran his own company he would have the latitude to help client companies in any way he thought was best. He didn't always enjoy that freedom working for other people, he said.

Leaders at both his previous consulting companies - CSC Index in Cambridge, Mass., and Vivaldi Partners in New York - had written books and "were like gurus in their field," he said. That meant it was hard to be creative in offering advice to clients.

"Having my own company, I can look at what all of the researchers and academics have to say about the best way to look at a (client's) problem," he said. "I guess I feel less constrained."

He recently answered questions posed by The Journal News in an e-mail exchange.

Q: What's the most common mistake companies make in branding their business and communicating their message to the public?

A: Implementing the brand before developing a strategy (for) results leads to inconsistent messages, poor choices for strategic partners and off-strategy creative.

Q: What is the most difficult type of message you sometimes have to convey to a client?

A: Less is more when it comes to engaging customers. A lot of clients overcommunicate by putting multiple messages out into the market, hoping one of them will stick. But hope is not a good strategy if they want to break through the clutter and engage their customers.

Q: What economic, business or cultural trends do you see that you believe will be favorable for your business?

A: M&A (merger and acquisition) and growth-oriented private equity create brand portfolio value and brand-based growth opportunities. In addition, the increased recognition that brands are experience-based, not just product-based, broadens the market - because now people understand that sports teams, cities, online merchants and people are brands and they can all benefit from starting with a clear strategy.

Q: What trends do you see that could be unfavorable?

A: The speed at which business moves creates impatience. Organizations that can't find the time to do it right will have to find the time to do it over. We want to help them get their strategy right the first time.

Q: How has the advent of the Internet in the last decade or so changed your industry?

A: It has created a whole new set of touch points for brands to connect with customers, suppliers and partners. It is a great medium for delivering engaging brand experiences but ... also poses risk if the Internet team is not on the same page as the rest of the brand.

Q: Companies have plenty of choices when it's time to hire a consultant. What do you tell prospective clients about why they should hire Next Level Strategic Marketing Group?

A: If they value a thoughtful, thorough, objective and customer-insight driven approach, we are a good choice. We get very close to our clients and their businesses. I may also suggest that they beware of designers or advertising agencies who offer brand strategy as a precursor to their creative work; it is a completely different approach and skill set than what we offer.

Q: How difficult is to hire staff in this economy? Is it a struggle to attract and retain people or are there a lot of people looking for work in your industry?

A: Many people want to do this work, but few are qualified to do it. We blend the rigor and analysis of strategy with the fun of marketing and branding, and we are both thought leaders and helping hands. It can be tough to find people with the right combination of experiences that would make them great consultants. ■

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