

Friends or Soul-mates?

FINDING YOUR PERFECT BRAND PARTNER

Ever rushed into a relationship? Fallen head first into what you thought was a lasting, long term partnership? Miss hits are normal and often expected in dating, but in the branding game, it can spell disaster. In the fourth of this series of branding articles, **Neil Osborne** explains how your intent toward and treatment of partners can be the beginning or end of a lasting brand.

Just as it is with life-partners, your selection of a brand partner can have a significant impact on your brand's destiny, so it's important to choose wisely. You need to consider if you're curious and just looking, chasing a short-term fling for excitement, wanting an upgrade or in need of a lasting long-term relationship.

The answers to those questions define the channel type you're looking to put your product through, as well as how, where and when you want your brand to be seen and sold.

Getting your brand stocked, distributed or discovered is like meeting that someone special. It's a huge challenge and everyone's after the same thing. To make the best choice, you need to know what you're after, start with the right intent and finally, treat your partner well.

Part Four: Placement & Partners

As the fourth of the 7Ps of salon industry brand building — refer to my first article in the March 2014 issue for all 7 Ps — placement (distribution channels) defines where your product will be stocked and bought, while your partner (selling approach) determines who and how your brand will be distributed and sold to those outlets.

Fundamentally a great product, at the right price, that consumers recognise as answering their needs and desires, is worthless without the right place (actual or virtual) in which a purchase can take place.

That said, placement should not be discounted as either a functional or logistical process. It is a branding decision.

It's a key element that contributes to your 'opportunities for exchange' — which are all the



touch points that occur between a producer and the end consumer. You want your product in 'the' place (not just 'any' place) where your ideal consumer is likely to be, so they will then find it, love it and buy it.

How many hands do you shake?

Historically, the supply chain for the exchange of goods and services was very short. There were no intermediary people (or steps) between the producer and the customer; who most often was also the consumer or user. It was primarily a one-to-one process and transaction.

However this model required that the physical distance the producer travelled to find and sell to his users, was short. That is no longer practical in today's marketplace.

Part of the challenge today is that placement of products is much more complex, flexible and is constantly in flux. People can buy from shopping centres, main street shops, the internet, catalogues and any combination of these. Because this is continually evolving, as a producer your notion of what constitutes 'placement' needs to shift and respond to these changes.

“So what are your placement and partner options within the salon industry? Choose a channel aligned with your brand positioning, pricing and business strategy and then select a partner within that channel, but beware ...”

What about my heart?

Your placement choice should proudly wear your brand heart on its sleeve.

But when building a brand, poor placement and partner selection can cast a long, dark shadow. This is especially the case when you're under significant pressure to generate early or significant sales lifts. That pressure often negatively influences your decisions and it's increasingly difficult to stay true to your brand positioning.

While the beauty and spa marketplace offers many channel choices — from high quality spas and clinics through suburban beauty salons to the more contentious platform, the internet — the real question is which one complements and reflects your brand, its image and values for not just now, but the long term.

The dating game revealed

Your ultimate goal in dating is to find synergy and see a path ahead. Your brand is no different. In today's fast moving, consumer driven marketplace, look for a place where you can woo your users, win their hearts and become a must-have.

So what are your placement and partner options within the salon industry? Choose a channel aligned with your brand positioning, pricing and business strategy and then select a partner within that channel, but beware ... some are monogamous while others like their partners in numbers.

1. Primary placement channels:

a. The Internet

Numerous brands (especially small start-ups) begin their sales journey here. However, the majority quickly discover it is not kind partner. The internet doesn't allow you to demonstratively convey your unique selling propositions (USP), and therefore the default differentiator becomes price.

b. The Professional Therapist Marketplace

There's no doubt that the beauty and dermal therapist, clinic and spa market is the ideal place for a quality skin care product. If that is your ideal outlet, you need to select a partner that will maximise your opportunities for exchange.

2. Key Partners:

a. A Distributor or Wholesaler

Starting out — in the early years — with a distributor can be highly beneficial to your brand. Literally hundreds of cash and carry and state-based distributors offer sales opportunities, but the real challenge is finding the right one ... the one that fits your brand.

By starting this type of partnership with the intent to create a supportive and nurturing relationship, it will always pay dividends. However, within this option there are many opportunities, each with pros and cons:

- i. The business model used by some distributors and wholesalers is designed to best support high volume and established brands. If you're small and starting out, those ones aren't for you.
- ii. Others have a structure where they have their own sales reps and often have a training facility. This model offers an opportunity to build trust and a lasting relationship, where you can assist the distributor in growing both your brand and his business.
- iii. Some distributors exclusively promote and sell online. This is definitely a contemporary option that is quickly finding its place in our electronic driven world.

A multi-brand selling partner has the ability to produce solid results for you, but their attention will always be shared across the other brands in their portfolio.

b. A Sales Agent

Another option is a sales agent. These are generally self-employed industry sales people who have built a clientele of salons in a specific geographical sales territory. As an independent contractor they sometimes represent and sell a single brand, but more often they handle numerous brands.

c. A Dedicated Sales Force

This partner offers consistency. You get exclusive focus on your brand, education policies are maintained and product USPs are championed. This model can be expensive — whether it's staffed full-time or part-time. For financial success it requires an established, significant sales volume as well as performance KPIs put into place and monitored.

When it's done well, this option can build a highly successful brand.

Are we meant for each other, forever?

Once you've decided on your placement and selected a partner, you need to treat them like one, rather than just a sales opportunity. They will not self-produce or flourish without tending; you need to work on your relationship.

Some treat their sales partner as just a place for a quick sale, when they can be so much more. The ideal is to work to understand the average day of your partner and consider what you can do to help them build their sales. This perspective will help you see opportunities to create tools, education concepts or ideas and encourage you to do things together that will help build your brand.

Remember, a strong relationship is the alchemy that produces brand gold. ■

Neil Osborne has devoted more than 30 years of his working life to making a difference to businesses in the Salon Industry. As a sales performance consultant, trainer and business mentor he helps businesses launch, grow and change their sales results. Contact him at THE SALES CATALYST, 1300 302 859 or go to www.thesalescatalyst.com.au. Download his FREE eBook, *The 11 Launch-Killer Mistakes and BONUS Planning & Costing TEMPLATES* at www.howtolaunchnewproduct.com.au