



Slip-sliding away: The traction of ideas

By Steve Harvill

Ever wonder why some ideas seem to stick, while others roll off their platforms like raindrops on your windshield, slip-sliding away? The difference often comes down to the concept of traction. The engineering field has a solid definition that involves the physical aspect of traction — the force used to achieve motion. Traction is needed in order for ideas to become engaged and connected.

As a professional in the concept business, I'm always amazed by how the process of traction relates to ideas. We launch one to two major strategic initiatives each year for core clients. These are well thought-out, actionable plans that take into account the unique business and cultural aspects of each particular business. We anticipate a substantive result from each idea that we create, but the reality is that some will find success and others won't. The difference? Traction.

Here are three core elements to look for to implement an idea and gain critical traction:

- **Relevance.** Does the idea have a connection to customers and your business?
- **Value.** Can you define the value the idea brings?
- **Buzz.** This is the energy of the idea. Does it move within its applied space? Does it build a bandwagon that consumers would want to jump on?

Using traction for success

During the early 1970s, Sony developed a revolutionary method of bringing movie production and viewing people's homes when it introduced the Beta-film format. High-quality video could be recorded by anyone and viewed on any television. The entertainment world would never be the same.

On the heels of Sony's Beta was JVC's VHS format, which performed the same function and became instant competition. From 1974 to 1977, the Beta format dominated sales, but a subtle shift occurred in 1978, when VHS began to gain traction. By the end of the 1980s, Sony's Beta format was out of the home-consumer entertainment business.

What happened? How did VHS gain traction so fast? Sony came out with Beta first and had a higher-quality product. But JVC's traction had occurred behind the scenes. The company had implemented a strategy of gaining relevance with the companies it needed for mass production, licensing, and distribution of its hardware and software, processes necessary for large-scale success. Its traction strategy was a battle for cooperation and for relationships supporting the VHS format as more relevant to an explosive market. JVC created relevance among the behind-the-scenes crowd, much to the consternation of consumers who had purchased Beta tapes and



"Slip-sliding away. You know the nearer your destination, the more you're slip-sliding away." — Paul Simon

players. Today, a similar battle for traction has been the marketing war between Apple and Microsoft.

Companies looking to create traction should get their ideas to engage this bandwagon effect. Using this method, traction takes advantage of value and buzz at the same time. With the VHS tape format, customers gradually perceived value in owning the standard considered most common in the industry. As VHS began to dominate, the public jumped on the VHS bandwagon, then the pre-recorded movie niche. Although most agreed that the Beta format gave a higher-quality picture, the buzz was all around VHS. Get the bandwagon rolling, and watch traction take over an idea and move it further than imagined.

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“To become engaged and connected, ideas need motion, or traction... Find the traction, and your world will change.”


Putting ideas into practice

The need for traction applies not only to world-changing ideas but to almost every idea launched in business. For example, a client recently launched its macro goals for 2007. There were two goals, and each was simple to understand: Increase profitability, and sustain excellence in customer relationships.

Shortly after the company made its formal announcement, I listened in on a divisional meeting, where an idea was pitched. Afterward, I knew that the idea would get almost no traction. As presented, this idea — although filled with potential — would go down in smoke because the designers had failed to meet a core aspect of traction: Relevance.

Without being passed through the company's newly stated filter, the idea lacked relevance to its goals and consequently lacked traction. I asked the group, “Can you tell us how this idea will increase profitability and sustain excellence?” That re-established the element of relevance, and once the leadership team repositioned the idea to show the potential for a new profit niche and how it could be sustained at a high level of performance, there was instant traction.

Markets shift and change with traction. In today's market, blogs play a key role in creating traction. Today's youth has a sense of disdain for the traditional sales approach, and blogs are finding a key role in the path of least resistance. Movies, music and cultural trends now can gain a staggering amount of traction through the sharing of opinions found in the blogosphere.

At every level, ideas need traction. Put your next idea through the traction filter. Does it have relevance, does it create a definable value and will it generate buzz to create a bandwagon effect? Find the traction, and watch your world change. 

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