

Read This Before Your Next MARKETING PILOT EXERCISE

Pilot, or Proof of Concept (PoC), programs have been a marketing staple for ages but the pace has picked up over the past few years thanks in part to the drive for marketing accountability. Unfortunately, these programs continue to be shortchanged on proper evaluation in spite of improved understanding of marketing effectiveness. Before planning your next pilot, familiarize yourself with the following considerations that should help build a better pilot and allow for fair evaluation of its impact.

Direct Marketing is Very Different Now Than it Was Just a Few Short Years Ago

Customers yearn to be communicated with in various ways, via methods that best suit their needs, and subsequently messaging and tactic strategies must conform in order to meet these customer demands. Historically, communications plans based on research, interviews, and “how we did it last year” were the norm. Increasingly, pilot programs with test and control/hold-out groups expose different communiqué stimulus in order to identify the sweet spot of communication effectiveness.

While this progress has marked an improvement in empirical marketing, many marketers still develop short-run pilot programs with two major overarching objectives — to understand if the program works as a whole and to make a go/no-go decision. Unfortunately, these programs more often than not tend to shortchange promising ideas because the pilot programs are not given adequate opportunity to shine.

» **Scale and Synergies.** Small marketing budgets divided amongst multiple brands, multiple customers, and multiple stages of the consideration funnel are generally more effective when pooled together and applied smartly. For example, developing a patient-centric program interwoven with a physician-supported targeted program can take advantage of resource synergies and provide positive results associated with the halo effect of addressing both audiences by applying a consistent messaging theme. Consider this as opposed to having multiple marketers, each working with lesser budgets, designing, and executing completely autonomous and unrelated campaigns.

Start by giving the right level of planning effort when building the pilot; be patient, allowing the pilot to perform to its fullest extent, and measure the results so educated decision are made. The new normal is now “informed marketing.”

» **Duration.** Quite often PoC or pilot campaigns are expected to deliver fast customer responses and produce speedy — and sometimes unrealistic — results.

These pilots are designed with specified beginning and predetermined end dates. If and when the pilot doesn't quickly bring a rich ROI, the original pilot is terminated, leaving marketers brainstorming for the next great pilot idea.

Programs need time to work, time for tactics and messages to be sent to customers, and customers need time to receive and process those messages before they will take the important next steps (your call-to-action).

Setting the right key performance indicators, measures, and realistic targets can help mitigate wrong termination of sometimes truly promising initiatives.

» **Flexibility.** Better results are appreciated when long-term, ongoing programs, rather than short-term campaigns, are developed with the expectation that the strategy embedded at the start of the program may be required to alter after the tactics are deployed and initial, and other mid-program, results are analyzed. Stopping a pilot completely and beginning a new pilot from scratch, simply to alter the strategy, can lead to spending significantly more money in start-up fees than had the original program been granted the opportunity to evolve and adapt over time. Having the willingness to be flexible and the fluidity to redirect the program based on real-time information and customer responsiveness will benefit the overall program success.

» **Interactive Effects.** The complexity of the customer interactions and direct messaging based on segmentation has to be cared for during planning and throughout the program. The days of preparing one uniform

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message and deploying it to a wide array of customers hoping to meet everyone's needs are over. Today's customers have strong communication preferences which require marketers to create and provide individualized, personal messages, and triggered cadences rather than relying on yesterday's batched deployment of linear tactics.

Be prepared and have multiple messages, designed for specific segments so relevant messaging is communicated to appropriate audiences when it's most applicable to them. Creating real-time, valuable messaging will help to maximize ROI.

Informed Marketing

Integrating these ideas when planning your next pilot should give the program a fair opportunity to prove itself out. By extension, your marketing investment should deliver better overall effectiveness by identifying truly successful programs and terminating those that are bound to fail. Start by giving the right level of planning effort when building the pilot; be patient, allowing the pilot to perform to its fullest extent, and measure the results so educated decision are made. The new normal is now “informed marketing.” **PV**

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