

AdvertisingAge®

SoBe Ditches Creative Agency in New Marketing Approach

Brand Breaks From Mold to Focus on More Team Collaboration

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Published: April 14, 2010

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Do you really need a creative agency? It seems SoBe's doesn't: its newest marketing effort was the progeny of digital, PR and promotion shops.

Though the marketer has worked with traditional creative agencies in recent years, last year it decided to change. The PepsiCo-owned brand had been working with Arnell Group to produce TV spots that ran during the 2009 Super Bowl and last spring, but while the ads generated "a ton of awareness," the company said they didn't deliver the engagement the brand was looking for. "The passionate fans weren't saying the things we thought they should be saying," said Angelique Krembs, director-marketing for SoBe. "Going forward we needed to get to engagement. That's why we evolved our approach."

After a request for proposals went out late last summer, Firstborn picked up digital agency-of-record duties, while [Weber Shandwick](#) became PR agency of record. TracyLocke, a longtime partner of the brand, continues to handle promotion. In addition to SoBe, several other PepsiCo beverage brands have backed away from Arnell Group since last year, including Tropicana and Pepsi.

Ms. Krembs said no traditional creative agencies were considered -- an intentional move as the brand looked to hook an 18- to 29-year-old target with content rather than advertising. To achieve that, SoBe's three agencies and brand team come together to "workshop" ideas and each agency works outside of its stated expertise. "We're not tied to the old methods. There's so much role-stretching happening," she said. "The process might seem more chaotic, but there's opportunity to improve [the marketing program], because you keep workshopping it. It's not, 'Here's [a brief] go out and make it.'"

The shift and selection of new agencies comes at a time when SoBe is doing extremely well, buoyed by last

year's launch of a zero-calorie line. It posted a 68% rise in volume last year, according to Beverage Digest. And its volume share of the enhanced water category nearly doubled to 10.7 points, making it about one-third the size of category giant Vitaminwater.

'Team-driving strategy'

SoBe's agencies say the new model allows for a more-collaborative team effort, and, they say it's a competitive advantage for the brand. "Ten years ago we were getting all the downstream stuff. Here we're part of the team-driving strategy," said Gail Heimann, vice chair-president of Weber Shandwick, New York. "It's not about channel discipline. ... We're all strategists who see things from a different viewpoint. We're focused on the target and what will engage him in the most effective way. The less fragmentation, the more efficiency. So, yes it will be a competitive advantage."

SoBe's new approach is on display beginning this week with two new TV spots, one was handled by Firstborn, and the other was handled by Sports Illustrated agency Southpaw. The spots build on material shot at a print-ad shoot for the SoBe "skinsuits," modeled by Ashley Greene, that appeared in the sports magazine's famed swimsuit issue. Footage from that shoot was first used online, as well as for PR, before being repurposed into TV ads.

Using the content online first allowed SoBe to see what was resonating with consumers, as well as avoid any expensive missteps with creative that missed the mark. "We're creating production efficiencies, but it's more of a strategic decision to let consumers react to different things out there and then reuse or use

them in a different way," said Dan LaCivita, president, Firstborn.

Ms. Krembs acknowledged that the approach is "very efficient" but said it's not a cost-cutting exercise. "The idea we started out with was that by the time we get to TV, we should be referencing something that's culturally relevant," she said. "The key to success is we're not starting with 'Here is our TV plan, and here's what we're going to create for it.' As opposed to creating advertising, we're creating content."

She added that going forward, it would be the brand's "first choice" to have content first appear online and then move to TV.

Ms. Heimann said SoBe's approach is indicative of the way the advertising industry is evolving. And, she said she expects to see more structures like this, even among bigger brands. "The onus on an organization like ours and those [bigger] brands is to think about how to make a structure like this work," she said. "It's harder in a massive, global brand, sure. ... You have to minimize territorialism and celebrate creativity."

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