Avis “We try harder” being towed to tag line junkyard?

A former Avis marketing executive contemplates Avis US dropping the "We try harder" tagline which has been part of Avis’ communications since 1962, in favor of a new one, "It's your space," and what that means for notions of brand equity—and perhaps marketing as a whole.

Your writer spent 13 1/2 years in four advertising and marketing positions at Avis, from 1988 until 2001 when it was acquired fully by the now dead-as-dodo HFS, later Cendant Corporation. It put me in the position of not only knowing about the 'We try harder' history, both in the US and internationally, but also living ‘We try harder’. I believe I can speak with some authority as what it meant to the company through many ownership changes, and how “We try harder” (WTH) evolved in the time I was there.

Since I left car rental eight years ago, I’ve paid little attention to the sector. I'm now just a normal occasional renter without any particular loyalties to any brand. But this change hit two nerves: the first as a professional marketer with a keen interest in positioning, and the second as a former Avis marketer who has some pride in her and her former colleagues’ marketing work prior to 2001. In fact, in writing comments for Dr. Brian’s discussion topic on LinkedIn’s CMO Network, I delved back into the past and caught up with what the industry dubs rent a car (RAC). So you can look upon the following critique as either pertinent and smart, or the ramblings of someone nostalgic for her past and out of touch with the current frequent car rental user, or perhaps marketing.

As marketers, we should question why a $1.8 billion company, closely associated with Three Little Words, would toss out 50 years of equity and positioning. To do so, let’s first look at what “We try harder” meant to Avis marketers prior to the merger with Budget, our agencies and the average Avis employee up until, apparently, recently.

*** “We try harder” (WTH) was always aspirational in two ways.** We promised a benefit to the customer that we would work our tails off for them to have a clean, ready, good car at the minimum and yes, much more than that. It was there for us to live up to operationally and it was 100% customer-focused. Internally, it gave us a standard to achieve thru the organization; I know since I was familiar with customer service and reservations training in many different areas, because marketers were always coordinating with operational areas. It's also a bar that was constantly being raised. As a marketer, with this kind of positioning, I had to be careful not to overpromise--but I had great consumer, travel agent (remember them?) and employee stories to tell.

One of the key parts of the Avis story is that Bob Townsend, CEO in the early 1960s (and ironically from American Express, as you will see), delayed the introduction of the WTH campaign for months until the company achieved clear operational and customer service goals consistently and at every location to fulfill the meaningful points of the campaign (e.g. clean reliable cars, clean ashtrays, friendly rental agents, locations—the bar was rather low in 1962). He shepherded a massive transformation of the company and the industry.

*** WTH was shapeable and reinforced constantly.** We could introduce new features and services easily--because we were always trying harder to please the customer. In the 1970s, Avis was the first with a computerized rental system, the Wizard of Avis. Examples in my time were Roving Rapid Return, Avis Express, Avis Preferred (pre-profiled preferences), Avis Plus (all inclusive rates for Latin Americans traveling to US), Avis Club Red (the first US travel agent frequency program) and many more I can’t recall.

*** WTH was timeless, differentiating and STRONG.** There is never anything dated about happy customers. It also said what we did and why we were different loud and clear, in three short words.

*** WTH translated well internationally.** You can look up the pictures of the buttons in 50+ languages. “We try harder” was often the linchpin of campaigns in countries like Brazil, South Africa, UK and Australia in campaigns far more memorable than ours in the US.

Unlike most tag lines, it uniquely worked within the organization to set a performance standard and externally to set the company’s relationship with and promise to the customer, in an active tone. WTH was never just a tag line or clever campaign like Pepsodent “You wonder where the yellow went” or VW 'Think Small' that rightly belong to the past. There was a power to it that proved to be quite adaptable over the years, memorably when Avis became an ESOP in 1987-8 (that lasted for 10 years). “We try harder” became “We're trying harder than ever” for several years. Every ad featured employee-owners and pride not only in the new company but also in every aspect of the operation. One of our most winning ads featured the headline 'For Rent by Owner'. That is an example of adapting a tag line effectively--the 'shapeable' mentioned above. Avis and the agency at the time, Backer Spielvogel Bates (later Bates), were awarded an American Marketing Association Gold EFFIE for that, for which we had to prove significant improvement in business.

So why would any sane company—Avis is our example here—leave this behind?

*** Operational decline not fulfilling the tag line promise.** In my day we were #1 in J.D. Power (2001) quality rankings and before then, a finalist for the Malcolm Baldrige national quality award. Flip to today: 2011 J.D. Power ranking was a dismal #5, 2012 Zagat #3. The problem with promises is that a service provider must 'do'. From the original campaign to at least the early 2000s, Avis was able to tell stories of getting it done. Now, it looks like it is not happening, and customers—business and leisure--are telling survey organizations loud and clear about their dissatisfaction.

*** Rising consumer expectations.** "We try harder" can turn into "so what" or "who cares" especially if the competition is very close to you in fulfilling that promise, and your company is falling down on the job. You have to <u>do</u>, particularly in those shining moments when there's a problem and the customer looks to you for resolution. Customer disappointment is a beast. To paraphrase an old Lyle Lovett tune, not being very good, but having good intentions is a killer for any brand.

*** It's an albatross.** The tag line holds back the organization from growth, the company's changed the product, it's changed or broadened product lines, or it (rarely) becomes associated with something negative. It's become meaningless to a changed market or truly obsolete (VW "Think Small" or International Business Machines changing to IBM). Nike is no longer running shoes, but a clothing and lifestyle behemoth clearly staking out performance in "Just do it"—and with enough marketing funding and memorable executions to make those Three Little Words indelibly stick. BMW no longer is "The Ultimate Driving Machine" when most of their cars are big, expensive sedans; they have been trying to express itself ever since ("Sheer driving pleasure" being the latest attempt).

There are also the consequences of "equity loss." This isn't a concept which marketers discuss a great deal, but when companies are sold, logos and company names have monetary value comprised in (US) "goodwill". So it stands to reason that when you drop a long-standing theme, tag line or logotype used over decades, there will be some kind of equity loss—a quantifiable monetary value. We should reflect that we as marketers for brands also cannot build equity like you once could, as the communications landscape is like shattered glass--it is so fractionated that reaching your target repeatedly and memorably is near-impossible or unrealistically expensive for most companies. (Remember when TV advertisers used to worry about commercial wearout?) "Viral" campaigns are great but unpredictable, have fruitfly lifespans and work best with established brands. Conclusion: any time you walk away from what your brand has built up in decades past--the last 50 years, or even from the 70s-80s on when you could run in mass media and get a mass audience--part of the marketer's calculation must be the cost of the equity lost in moving the new positioning.

Do you tear down the house, or remodel it?

So let's look at Avis US and the new tag line/campaign, which tears down the house, but really doesn't.

"It's your space" is running on TV and in print advertising (so far), debuting in late August. The industry announcement was in <u>Advertising Age</u>: http://adage.com/article/news/50-years-avis-drops-iconic-harder-tagline/236887/
Avis also saw fit to issue a press release here announcing the new campaign and the departure from "We try harder": https://www.avis.com/car-rental/content/display.ac?contentId=press-release-US_en-036051, and has uploaded the three TV spots to YouTube. In Avis' words, "the campaign aims to redefine and elevate the role of the rental car within corporate travelers' busy lives and centers on the ways business professionals use the space inside the rental vehicle to be productive and recharge when travelling". The CMO claims that "We try harder" is in the DNA of the company.

Based on the viewing, the three scenarios are:
1) A young business team on the way to the presentation having selected their SUV at pickup from the Avis Preferred area. The key presenter has a case of nerves, the other two joke him out of it, the presentation is smashing and the young men open up the rear door to reveal golf clubs for a little recreational/male bonding time.
2) Youngish sales rep is hyping himself up in the car, singing along to the radio, banging the steering wheel and generally amping himself up for show time. He makes the killer presentation, wins the account and mambos out to the BMW quite pleased with himself.
3) Another 30-40ish sales rep has presentations and a trade show (complete with older, sick prospect sneezing on him), but because he has the wisdom to rent a cool convertible, he can pick up the wife and kids at the airport after the trade show for some beach time—dubbed a "bizcation" (in the biz, a mixed business/leisure rental, and highly desirable in that it lengthens the rental over the weekend.)

All are centered on the proposition that the car that you rent becomes "your space" for a time—a meeting space, a coaching space, a detach-from-a-hard-day-at-work space, a family space, a reward space. Quite noticeable in the closing frames was "It's your space", a new Avis logo (upright in a plain typeface, rather than the forward leading slant of the 1990s on) and the complete absence of "We try harder."

First impressions are often the truest. Here are some extracts from that early discussion on the CMO Network, credited:

> "What the heck is 'your space' anyway? Yes, I get that peace and quiet deal in the car, or that the car is a meeting space. But in a rental, where I'm concerned about getting from point A to point B on time, on unfamiliar roads and late for a meeting (or a date with a beach)? It's a campaign theme, one of many Avis has had over the years. **And I can rent 'my space' from another RAC."** Your space"="My Space", a failed online website.
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> "The thrust seems to be that the target customer may be traveling for business but when they're in their rental car, it's their own time. Interesting. We've all been there -- had that feeling of freedom. It's obviously a pre-emptive claim." (Nancy Salz, New York—who in my time at Avis met with the marketing staff and gave a memorable training session on developing "advertising that works" through sound positioning and strategic development)
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> "God, another technocrat marketer decides that empowering the consumer is the way to get them to engage with the brand. Vacuous, bland, empty and flaccid. It's truly remarkable how brain dead some marketing people are and how motivated they are by the need to 'bring the brand into a more contemporary landscape'." (David O'Sullivan, San Francisco)
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> "It's what I'd expect from IKEA" (Jeff Fleishman, New York)

To judge from this campaign, Avis is now just like Hertz, National, Dollar Thrifty, and any other RAC. (Enterprise has always had a clear identity as a 'community' based RAC, friendly, local, insurance replacement and 'we deliver', even when they are on airport, and upsell you relentlessly on rates, cars and coverage!) Because any other car rental offers you the same "space" and not just car rental—it's easily applied to other categories.

The other objection I had was executional. Two of the spots are positively 'fratty' – the only renters are young (or acting like such) men. The business world as seen in these spots consists of young men dressed fairly casually, with one or two women briefly seen at the table. There are no women renters, no women in authority and no older executives at those meetings. Even the wife is briefly, distantly seen. As one of those older, female types, I felt excluded from the fun.

Bottom line, "It's your space" is kind of empty and a low-level consumer benefit. As a campaign, it's executionally flawed. How it translates to non-business and international renters is questionable. At least in preliminary judgment, it is not likely to elevate Avis above the fray as "We try harder" did.

And why is "We try harder" gone? Can't the two work together?

Could it be a vast misread of consumer research that spurred this? We see brands abandoning their USP all over the place in the name of 'relevance': Xerox with the lower case logo and the x-banded squeezy ball. Just be another copier, just be another car rental company, because it's defensible? A common reaction in this discussion is that brands are drowning in a tide of plain-vanilla positioning and equity abandonment at a time when the whole media landscape is fractioning into a million tiny bits and we have to fight for a tiny bit in the customer's mind.

Is it a necessary move by a newly minted CMO to make her mark? Or something more?

Let's look at it from the marketer's perspective, putting ourselves in the CMO's shoes in this scenario.
Caveat: I am no longer in contact with anyone at Avis, so there is no inside line here. This is gleaned from public information and remembering how quick-turn and demanding Avis was, and similar situations I later faced. It does analyze the business situation and speculates on what a relatively young, and new to RAC CMO might do in response—a situation that most of us, once upon a time, have found ourselves in….

> Up until June of 2011, Avis Budget was in a pitched battle with Hertz for months to acquire Dollar Thrifty (DT) for ever-tidier sums. FTC (US Federal Trade Commission) and the DT shareholders held it up forever. Avis then swerved and acquired Avis Europe, which also includes Africa, Middle East and Asia--effectively it was Avis' largest licensee, at a cost $1 billion—putting right a situation dating back to the 1987 ESOP when this division was sold. This effectively put Avis out of the running for DT; Hertz finally sealed the deal for $2.8 billion in August 2012. [In the US, there are now three holding companies for RAC brands: Enterprise (Enterprise, Alamo, National), Hertz/DT and Avis Budget. This is based on fleet and locations. Market share is difficult to calculate as it is based on airport reporting alone.)]
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> The CMO arrived in July 2011 after 11 years of moving up the ranks at American Express, previously at Ford Motor, and settled in to a situation undoubtedly quite different from the time she was interviewing. Advertising and communications had been moribund for a while, and she had to be brought in to change things. In a position like that (and in a heavily operational, 'get it done' company like Avis), you must make your mark fast. Changing agencies is usually the way but McCann-Erickson, which came on board in 1999, still had a few fans because it took a not-unusual seven months, and McCann retained the international business. Leo Burnett Business obviously had the

goods, because they won the business in February 2012.

So by summer 2012, there's a new agency with the old one not gone and a monster threat from Hertz, though not in their communications, yet. The clock is running on both the business and the CMO. Time to steal a march and have Burnett produce get a bright, shiny new campaign with money spent on big media. RAC seasonality being what it is, it will be a largely business campaign. At the same time, service levels and perceived customer satisfaction have fallen (see J.D. Power and Zagat)--the Avis Budget combo has always been an odd operational merger of two very different in style and brand equity companies. “We try harder” looks less and less credible. The CMO segments out Avis as a 'premium brand' (her statement) for business. For business renters, perhaps the research is telling Avis that there's a market shift in the mentality of the core renter and a specific weakness in 25-45 renters. This 'workspace' / lifestyle nugget may have surfaced and was latched upon. So they run with it in a Fall 2012 business campaign targeting those 25-45 male renters. And the daring thing--what gets the publicity, and elevating it at least in the industry from ‘ho hum’--is walking away from “We try harder”.

A very cynical way is to put it as Dr. Brian did: 'newbie CMO has eye on reputation first'. A campaign alone won't get you ink, personal and otherwise, in Ad Age. Dropping a revered tag line will. If you read the Ad Age article, it was part a nostalgic stroll down Memory Lane (the development of WTH by DDB’s Helmut Krone and Paula Green), then a brief description and video embed of the new campaign. Some of that was to be expected. If the lifespan of a CMO is 18 months, the clock as of August was at 13-14. You can imagine also for this young (perhaps 40) CMO the real culture shock going from an orderly, structured Amex to what we called “down and dirty rent-a-car”. Amex people in my time (including a CEO and a SVP marketing) didn’t last; airline, ad agency and direct marketers did. If the CMO can show real results on the board and to the Board--given that Avis hasn't really much traditional, broad based advertising against this target in this time period for some years, this campaign could be “winning” based upon the business metrics as set.

Avis now joins the roster of companies who have joined in the tyranny of low expectations in moving to a narrow and seemingly weak campaign masquerading as a company tag line. In addition, they are walking away from 50 years of hard-won, precious brand equity for the worst possible reason—because operationally they aren’t living up to it anymore. It should be a disappointment to marketers, because it is further evidence that most CEOs and Boards feel we are there to ‘put lipstick on a pig’; more properly, solve, skirt or spin problems beyond marketing's rightful capabilities to fix, whether operational or economic. Moreover, it points out the cumulative cost of not refreshing a brand promise publicly with meaning, internal performance and external content. Avis, which was always guilty of underfunding its communications versus competition, simply became more so in the last 10 years as they concentrated on online media and partnerships, spending little in traditional, wide-audience advertising.

Of course, we will see whether the departure from ‘We try harder’ is a permanent one. The betting among those in the discussion was a return in six to twelve months. Perhaps not a New Coke-ish drama with renters and employees pouring off Routes 46 and 80, storming the Parsippany NJ office demanding The Return of We Try Harder, but a return nonetheless. It could be that the campaign is there to buy time for an operational tune-up to get the company back to where it once was.

My brother Paul, a psychiatrist by profession and a student of human behavior in a different realm, quipped: “Avis should change their slogan to ‘We Gave Up’.” He may well be right. As a former Avis Marketeer, and who had great pride in the company now 11 years in my rear view mirror, I hope not.

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About the author: Donna Cusano is a New York-based designer of strategic, integrated marketing programs and communications. After an early career starting on the ad agency side, coming up through account management rather non-traditionally at Scali McCabe Sloves and LHS&B Advertising, she had three memorable years of being ad manager for post-deregulation airline New York Air and a year watching the demise of Eastern Airlines (and more happily, the introduction of the OnePass frequent flyer program) as an account supervisor at Campbell-Ewald Advertising. Shortly before EA augered in, she joined a former VP of hers at Avis for what turned into a 13½ year stint through four positions at Avis Rent A Car, and learned many lessons in marketing from many highly talented people to whom she is forever indebted. Her last five years were as Avis’ first Director of International Marketing and Partnerships. Since 2001 she has variously been a marketing consultant and VP Marketing, transitioning into healthcare services and technology in 2006 as VP Marketing for early-stage developer Living Independently Group for three years. Donna has also been Editor, North America of Telecare Aware (www.telecareaware.com), an international news and commentary website, since September 2009; this experience has happily broadened her horizons to become a healthcare services and technology thought leader. She is available for both full time and consultant marketing opportunities. More at www.linkedin.com/in/dcusano.

Some extras:

The Google 'Re-Brief' on reimagining Avis for digital engagement. http://www.projectrebrief.com/avis/
Hat tip to Barrett Rossie of Spokane, Washington. Great video with the original writer, Paula Green, with recap of the original 1962 campaign (they got most of the ads!) anchors how a Google team worked with Green to translate WTH into digital by using customer testimonials and even the negative comments to automatically create short videos that appear as a sidebar on the website. Do see the video--the first try is a bit of a misfire, but the regrouping is really sharp and the process of how they do it just blows this marketer away. Yes, the new CMO appears....cautiously.

Avis South Africa springboarding off and evolving "We try harder" quite memorably:
On YouTube, a new spot deals with a very SA problem, which are the long distances between petrol stations, and how Avis will help you when the needle points to 'E', the car stops dead and you're in the middle of nowhere on your way to an event. A memorable and persuasive reason why to choose Avis. http://youtu.be/O4AkkWy4fhQ
The corporate video springboards WTH into what it means in action.
Corporate video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_hXDn0zHzI&feature=share&list=UUOsW6QhbrhKJmJf2d7aad9w

A conversation between Ken Taub of New York City and the author on a new car rental model:

Ken: It seems the auto rental business is in a mess generally, with too much competition, overall mediocre service, and one's quoted rental price somehow always going up 20 - 40% once you arrive at their counter... So there is opportunity for a smart businessperson (think Warren Buffet & his mgmt. team and GEICO or Michael Dell with PCs and laptops in the 1990s) to take over a chunk of this sagging business, and create an efficient giant that streamlines, ups the level of service, has good pricing, and keeps its promises. Chaos is trouble... and opportunity.

Donna: I think you are proposing a simplified pricing/simplified fleet model that would be a variant on the Zipcar/Hertz On Demand car sharing model. Let's take a look at this:
**Zipcar isn't cutting it, despite their onerous $60/year + $25 membership fee, and high rates. Too many models and locations. Only so many cities and college towns. A la Facebook, they IPO'd at $28 and are trading at $8.
**Hertz On Demand: no membership fees, just join. Hertz conjoined this to an existing Hertz Local operation and can amortize it across a fleet. Was called Hertz Connect and rebranded to a better name. ?? if profitable
**Avis took a stab at this last year and reportedly pulled back. They never had the local operation to pull this off.

If you really want to disrupt car rental a la Clayton Christensen, bring back the low end rental. Remember Rent A Wreck? Not quite, but a variant. Simplified all inclusive pricing (like car sharing). Simplified fleet--as few car types/makes-models as possible, and older cars--you get a 50K+ mile car that would give you reliable point A to B transport. Simplified rental process--you'd have the swipe card pickup/return like Hertz and Zipcar have. The locations might be on the fringes of town, but the money saved would be worth it. And maybe you rent to 18-24 year olds, which no other RACs do except on high end corporate rates (not sure on car sharing). Many more details here -- and isn't this an opportunity?

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