MaxMessage™

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

The success of a product, service or brand hinges on the effectiveness in communicating its value to the consumer. Companies make significant investments in getting their messages out to the market, but if the underlying message fails, the investments are worthless. Thankfully, market research can ensure that marketing investments translate into sales, and Rockbridge's MaxMessage™ solution uses proven science to provide a clear roadmap for developing persuasive communications that make a real impact.

MaxMessage™ has guided communications in a variety of circumstances, including product launches, brand positioning, introducing a new feature, and encouraging adoption of new innovations. We have applied our approach in a wide variety of categories ranging form banking to dog food, and in b2c, b2b and non-profit situations. This communications research solution answers commonly asked questions by clients, including:

- What features will differentiate our offering from competition?
- What are the deeper motives – needs, emotions and values – that drive demand?
- What language and symbols should we use in our communications?
- How do we craft a message that will make an impression and motivate consumers to action?

Many of the typical methods used to answer the above questions result in frustration. For example, qualitative interviewing methods (e.g., focus groups, dyads, interviews) offer ambiguous findings and leave room for subjectivity. Survey methods are more objective, but fail to convey the emotional depth and language to craft messages that truly resonate (and often result in going back to the market with follow-up qualitative research). MaxMessage™ is an efficient approach that provides the clarity and depth needed to create communications. Advantages include the following:

Scientifically valid: The approach is science-based, relying on an established theory (means-end) that is proven to predict behavior. It explains behavior at multiple levels from tangible to more emotional, and connects the levels. This means that messages resulting from this method will drive action and deliver better results.

Efficient and reliable: MaxMessage™ is a survey-based solution, which offers the advantages of greater reliability, efficiency and speed.

Free of subjectivity: The results are structured and derived quantitatively, which ensures objectivity for those charged with creating messaging.

Actionable: MaxMessage™ provides a framework for developing creative outputs, identifying specific elements and linkages that should be stressed, which makes it easier to develop compelling communications.

> *"An important idea not communicated persuasively is like having no idea at all."*
>
> *– Bill Bernbach, Advertising Pioneer*

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

The Science Behind MaxMessage™

MaxMessage™ is based on an established theory of consumer behavior, Means-End, which has been proven to explain consumer choice. The theory holds that while individuals may base choices on tangible features or attributes, their choices are driven by satisfying higher order needs that ultimately tap into overarching values that govern choices within a category. Any choice can be explained by a means-end chain that links a tangible, differentiating feature with increasingly abstract needs. The feature that is the basis for a choice offers an immediate functional benefit, which in turn satisfies a higher order psycho-social need, which ultimately taps into a deeper value. The theory recognizes that we are constantly making choices as consumers, professionals, members and citizens, and

in the process, we seek to satisfy tangible and emotional needs that are consistent with values.

The operation of the theory can be explained with an example. A client in the nutrition sector wanted to market a vitamin formulation. The buyers of the product indicated that they preferred the particular brand over competitors because it contained all-natural, organic ingredients. When asked why this mattered, most consumers felt that these ingredients would have greater efficacy in releasing energy and nutrients to their body. This in turn made consumers feel more productive. Ultimately, this tapped into values including a desire to be a success in life and a good parent.

Means-end is not just an interesting theory. The science reveals how the various elements should be used to motivate

individuals to action. An effective communication piece will portray multiple elements in the value chain and will draw linkages between one or more elements. The greater degree to which the elements and linkages are apparent to consumers, the more motivating the message will be. Often, companies expect advertising or other types of communications to be effective because they have a high production quality, but find they fall flat when introduced to the market against competing messages. A careful parsing of these failed messages may reveal that the differentiating features and higher order benefits are not clearly portrayed and/or the communication fails to draw linkages.

ATTRIBUTE	FUNCTIONAL CONSEQUENCE	PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCE	VALUE
Unique product feature "X"	Greater certainty in financial commitments	Feeling of greater control	Makes me a responsible money manager

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

In the example of the vitamin formulation, an effective ad would stress the all-natural the ingredients and would connect this feature to the benefits of greater energy, and ultimately, a feeling of being more productive. The ad would also convey the values this proposition taps into, such as showing imagery of an energetic parent.

How MaxMessage™ Works

MaxMessage™ is a survey-based solution that employs a structured laddering approach to ferret out key decision attributes and associated benefits and values. It is worth stepping back to talk about laddering research in general. Classic means-end studies rely on a comprehensive laddering methodology whereby skilled interviewers elicit full means-end chains linked to consumer decisions. These types of interviews are typically done in-person or by telephone with a web interface. Such studies provide high quality insights, and Rockbridge often conducts this kind of research for clients. The major drawback of this classic approach is its high cost, which is due to the need to interview respondents one-on-

one directly, its reliance on highly trained professional interviewers, and a rigorous quality control process to ensure that the results are usable for structured analysis. An additional drawback stemming from the high cost is that clients must often rely on a smaller sample size, usually 50 to 150 interviews (versus 300 to 1500 that is more typical of MaxMessage™ studies). In practice, we have found that only companies with large research budgets could afford this kind of research (say, a manufacturer spending tens of millions on advertising), while the budget was out of reach of most clients in the services, technology and non-profit sectors.

A side note is that many researchers mistakenly classify means-end studies as qualitative research when it is actually quantitative. It is true that these studies yield the kinds of deep insights that we expect from qualitative research, but the data for a means-end study is highly structured (all inputs are coded) and the analysis involves a great deal of quantification and correlation. Because of this confusion, companies may hire qualitative moderators to employ laddering

techniques in interviews, focus groups or small group interviews, while failing to impose the structure and rigor required to produce valid results. Regretfully, this leaves clients disillusioned because the results of such "faux" means-end studies are ambiguous, subjective and unreliable.

MaxMessage™ provides the structure for conclusive and insightful results in an efficient manner by gathering data in a sample survey, with most studies being fielded online or by telephone. After years of effort and scores of studies, Rockbridge has tested and perfected a survey structure that captures the necessary data to quantify the importance of different attributes, functional benefits, psychosocial benefits and values, and link these in order to guide messaging.

A typical MaxMessage™ study starts by asking a series of relevant questions about the marketing problem, notably, how information will be used, relevant background on the situation, the competition, and most important of all – the buyer choice that messaging is intended to influence.

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

A simple illustration of defining a study is an election campaign. The "choice" is to vote for our candidate, and the study would be designed to convince undecided voters to choose our candidate over others on the ballot. A real-life client example was an Internet Service Provider (ISP) operating in market where there are at any time one or two competitors. The study was designed to determine how to convince competitor customers to switch to the client brand, or convince the client's own customers to retain their brand. In this case, we designed the sample to include a mix of our client's and competitor's customers in the client's trade area, and the survey questionnaire was designed to establish the "why" behind leaning toward our client brand or leaning toward a competitive brand.

Because MaxMessage™ is structured, we may recommend a qualitative phase to identify a thorough list of features, benefits and values to capture quantitatively. This is particularly valuable for new or unique marketing problems. For example, one client wanted to explore how to motivate customers to use a an innovative technology feature for purchasing their service, but since it was relatively obscure when introduced, we found it valuable to explore motivations through individual depth interviews. Often, we skip the qualitative phase because we have strong familiarity with the category (e.g., finance, travel, technology) or the client has conducted qualitative research that can inform questionnaire development.

Once we gather survey data from the relevant audiences, we engage in a structured analysis that results in a Market Decision Map. This map identifies and quantifies the importance of differentiating features/ attributes that drive the desired choices in the marketplace. The map also quantifies the most important reasons these features matter (functional benefits), the most important psycho-social benefits, and the values that drive choices. The map also identifies *linkages* between the different levels of motivation. For example, an important feature for an ISP may be higher speeds, but this may link to a subset of all possible functional benefits, such as access to richer content and ability to have m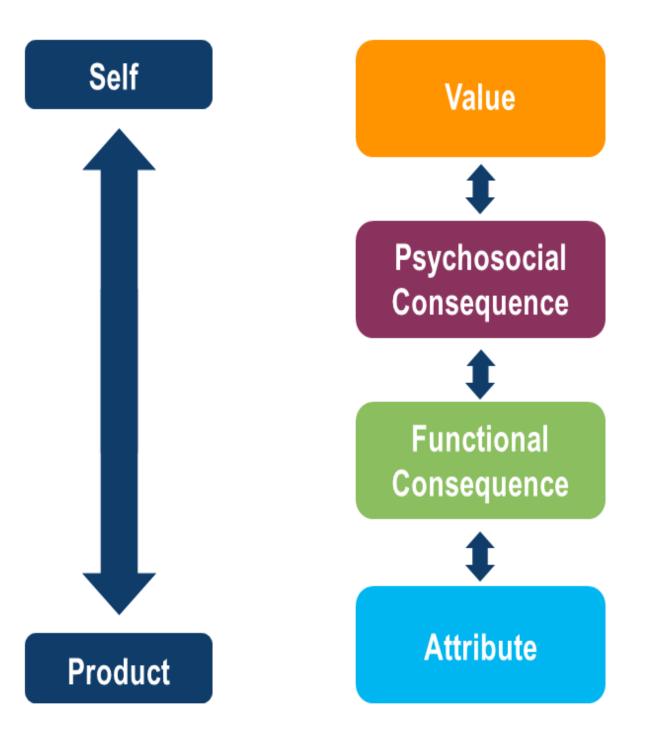ultiple users. A different feature, such as service reliability, may link to a different outcome such as less wasted time on trouble shooting.

The final output of a MaxMessage™ study consists of one or more value propositions for each target segment. Each value proposition consists of a dominant value chain that serves as a basis for positioning the product, brand or behavior. These value propositions provide the jumping off point for developing communications that are anchored in tangible and intangible buyer needs. A typical study will yield two to four value propositions emphasizing different benefits. These are tactical in nature, providing a clear roadmap for the marketing team to craft creative executions. The figure below illustrates a value proposition for a credit union that explains why a consumer may choose the client for an account over a competitor. The value proposition is based on two differentiating features (that drive consumers to choose the credit union over a bank): minimal fees and flexible business approach. Both of these benefits link to the benefit of avoiding surprises, i.e., increased certainty about finances.

Getting to the Heart of Buyer Behavior

These functional benefits in turn link to the psychosocial benefit of control, which in the end matters because the consumer is concerned with focusing on important life goals.

Consumer Model of Decision Making
Means-End Model

Self

Product

Value

Psychosocial Consequence

Functional Consequence

Attribute

One way of viewing this value proposition is that it defines consumer need at different levels ranging from the tangible to intangible. A consumer may explicitly tell us she is drawn by the **minimal fees and flexible approach** of a credit union, but what is she really buying? The answer is **greater certainty** in financial management (e.g., low likelihood to get hit with surprise fees caused by failing to comply with the rules, and if there is a fee, an expectation that credit union will be understanding and wave it). At a another level, the consumer is buying **control** over her finances. And ultimately, the decision to go with the credit union satisfies a life value – **goal focus.**

Using MaxMessage™ to Develop Communications

MaxMessage™ provides a ready-to-apply framework for developing communications. First, it identifies three outcomes that should be associated with the product, brand or behavior. Creative execution should stress how the choice delivers at least two of these. Second, it should stress linkages between these outcomes in order to reinforce the "we

message – for example, instead of saying don't hit you with lots of fees" and "we bring certainty to banking" and "we give you control," it is more powerful to say "we don't hit you with lots of fees, which makes banking predictable and gives you control." Third, MaxMessage™ identifies the important value orientations that should be stressed symbolically in communications – for example, a visual might show a picture or tell a story about someone achieving a goal, such as buying a home. To provide greater clarity, MaxMessage™ also provides input on how consumers perceive different benefits or values, such as symbols that represent a value or examples of a benefit.

To sum it up, MaxMessage™ offers clients a powerful tool for developing effective communications. The method works in a range of situations, including C2C and B2C, and for guiding messaging for products, services, non-profits, brands and adoption behaviors. The approach is anchored in science, objective, actionable and efficient, but most important of all, provides clients with deep insights to drive a successful communications strategy.

Footnotes

1. Reynolds, Thomas J., and Jerry C. Olson. Understanding Consumer Decision Making: the Means-End Approach to Marketing and Advertising Strategy. Psychology Press, 2013.

About MaxMessage™

MaxMessage™ relies on a rigorous and unique quantitative survey methodology for identifying the message themes that will resonate with your target market. Our approach measures the tangible product features and benefits, and identifies how they link to specific psycho-social needs and personal values your customers' seek to fulfill.

The result is a Consumer Decision Map that provides a clear picture of the common decision paths that exist in the market. We reveal the linkages between individual product features and benefits that lead to underlying emotions and values that ultimately drive buyer choice.

About Rockbridge Associates, Inc.

Since 1992, Rockbridge has connected insights to outcomes for clients – adapting to changing landscapes and implementing innovative, proven solutions to meet clients' changing needs.

Rockbridge serves a variety of industries, but focuses primarily on the services, information, and non-profit sectors, with particular expertise in digital services, financial services, technology, media, associations, and hospitality and travel.

Please visit www.rockresearch.com for more information.

Contact Us

If you would like to talk to us about anything you have read in this whitepaper, please contact Joe Taliuaga at jtaliuaga@rockresearch.com.