



Bring Your “Shelf Potato” to Life

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There's a sad type of tool product that litters retailers shelves and clogs manufacturer inventory – a product we've nicknamed the “shelf potato”.

Shelf potatoes are products that manufacturers and retail buyers love, but that collect dust on the shelf. And shelf potatoes are potential gold mines because the right communication can turn a shelf potato into a retail superstar.

Past Shelf Potato Success

The clearest and most dramatic examples of shelf potato transformation are found when television demonstrates the product's value. The George Foreman grill and ProActiv acne treatment were both shelf potatoes. Grills identical to the Foreman had been on shelves since the 1980's. And ProActiv's primary ingredient is identical to many others already on the market. But fresh, new communication brought both products alive and made them relevant to consumers.

Television impact has been similar for some superb hardware products. Who would have thought the Fein Multimaster could sell to a broad market? And while the Kreg Jig has always sold well to professionals, our infomercial has brought the product to an entirely new market. Without video demonstration, the Kreg Jig was a shelf potato to the vast retail DIY market.

Do You Have a Shelf Potato?

Five themes help identify shelf potatoes.

- Shelf potatoes have lackluster sales, but are *passionately loved by the people who buy them* – whether pro or DIY. This indicates a disconnect between what consumers “think” a product will deliver and its true value.
- Shelf potatoes are products that only sell when consumers *walk into the store looking for them*. As a result, you must increase demand by reaching potential buyers outside the store.
- Manufacturers often wrongly believe that they have communicated to buyers about their shelf potatoes. So sit back and *take a second look*. You may not have put enough weight behind your message. Or you may have relied on stereotyped, stale messages that lack the subtlety needed to create demand.
- Shelf potatoes are often products that were “the buzz” at the Hardware Show the year they were released. That may indicate something quite positive about the product, but there's a *very good chance the buzz never reached consumers*.
- For most shelf potatoes, their benefits are *complex and difficult to explain*. When these benefits are successfully

communicated, the result is high margins and long life at the retail store.

Research the Messages that Move These Products

If you think you might have a shelf potato, research can be used to determine whether messages can drive product interest. But in this research, avoid the superficial “top 2 box” quantitative research used by many companies to vet products.

Instead, listen to people who've bought the product to hear about the specific value it brought them. Based on what you hear, use in-depth focus groups to learn which communication can drive consumer interest. Then use quantitative research to estimate sales potential once it's effectively communicated.

Choose Your Communication Mediums Wisely

Once you've found your shelf potato, how do you bring it to life with communication? To begin, plan to make paid advertising your primary mechanism. Public Relations (PR) is a strong complement to paid advertising, but the DIY market is far too fragmented for PR to be your primary method of driving out messages.

Then evaluate your media options carefully – and with some skepticism. There's a tremendous wealth of new media opportunities popping up all around us. Many of these opportunities are exciting. At the same time, the

snake oil salesmen of advertising have been attracted to new media and social media like moths to a light bulb.

Despite their costs, don't shy away from traditional advertising like television, radio and print. Television, for example, brings unequalled demonstration power to hardware and tool products. And the latest research from Deloitte and the Advertising Research Foundation shows that TV is as strong as ever (despite what else you might read). Note that this research has also found that new media performs best as an adjunct to traditional media campaigns.

Solving the Shelf Potato Problem Creates Profit

Every year at the National Hardware show I see an amazing array of innovative products on display – products that come from years of hard work by dedicated teams. And, lacking critical communication, I know that many of these products will end up collecting dust on retail shelves. It doesn't need to be this way.

When retailers and manufacturers deliver the strong communication needed to support shelf potatoes, those products come alive and everyone benefits. Strong communication creates higher margins, increases inventory turns, and creates brand value that makes future products more successful. And best of all, strong communication creates profit today – turning shelf potatoes into superstars.

About the Author...

Doug Garnett is an advertising pioneer in the tool, home, and hardware markets starting with his work on the Sears/Craftsman TV spots in the 1990's. He is founder & CEO of Atomic Direct – an advertising agency specializing in brands, consumer strategy, and driving sales with television. Atomic's award winning television based campaigns have featured Kreg Tool, Festool, Drill Doctor, Worksharp, and Rubbermaid paint tools among others. Doug is a member of the Response Magazine editorial board and an adjunct professor of advertising in the business school at Portland State University. He can be reached on Twitter at @DRTVGuru or through www.atomicdirect.com.