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Goodyear treads consumer-centric path

Craig McGuire - 20 Feb 2006 00:00

Goodyear reinvents itself with a commitment to making its technology relevant to consumers

When the White House hosted the 2004 NBA World Champion Detroit Pistons last year, starting guard Richard Hamilton drew plenty of coverage, but not for his on-court heroics.

Photographers couldn't get enough of Hamilton wearing his hair in the style of the tread pattern of Goodyear's Assurance TripleTred product.

"Sure, it was a risk for us, and two years ago we wouldn't have done something like this," says Chuck Sinclair, SVP of global communications. "It is edgier than the stuff we did previously, but signals more of what you can expect from us in the future."

The Hamilton stunt may have seemed out of character for Goodyear, known for decades as little more than a dependable US manufacturing mainstay.

But the buzz emanating out of Akron, OH, over the past few years marks a re-birth of the brand behind the blimps, into more of a consumer-centric company.

This reinvention of one of America's most known, but little understood, brands parallels a turnaround effort launched in the aftermath of a downshift in the 1990s when cheaper competitors and an oversupply of manufacturing capacity forced prices down and cut deep into industry profit margins.

To reduce costs by \$1.5 billion, Goodyear eliminated product lines, closed facilities, cut jobs, and negotiated a new contract with the United Steelworkers of America. The measures appear to be working, as Goodyear says it anticipates record sales of almost \$20 billion for 2005.

Even just a few years ago, Goodyear had no new products in the pipeline and hadn't had a significant new introduction since the AquaTred in the early 1990s.

"We had to have something new to introduce to dealers at our annual conference," says Ed Markey, VP of PR and communications for North American Tire (Goodyear's largest unit). "And it had to be great."

In 2003, it debuted the Goodyear Assurance featuring TripleTred technology, drawing buzz for its three distinct tread zones for dry, wet, and ice performance.

Today, Goodyear is using its PR and marketing muscle to appeal to consumers in a language

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they understand, an approach known internally as leveraging "Kitchen Logic," relating to the average consumer in the context and language of a conversation that he or she might have at the kitchen table.

"Consumers won't respond to a PSV3000-type of brand, or molecule makeup, or silicone content," says Chuck Sinclair, SVP of global communications. "But when they hear about Silent Armor and Kevlar, well, you're going to have a hard time getting them to accept anything less."

"Relevant technology" is another phrase buzzing about the boardroom at Goodyear these days to describe how the company plans to cuddle up closer to consumers. It describes how Goodyear promotes its technology through its messaging, using key phrases and concepts to make the technology behind its tires relevant for its customers.

Earlier this year at its annual dealer meeting in Nashville, TN, Goodyear debuted Eagle featuring ResponsEdge technology, manufactured with carbon fiber-reinforced sidewalls and Kevlar shock absorbers. The "relevant technology" messaging: "Are you getting enough fiber?"

"We don't need brand awareness," Sinclair says. "Goodyear as a brand has great recognition. We need to communicate the technology behind our products."

"Technology is what separates tires, but communicating technology is difficult," says Bob Ulrich, editor of Modern Tire Dealer. "[Goodyear] has done it with the right language, the right focus on product, and making engineers and executives accessible at the right times."

Unlike other consumer goods companies, Goodyear faces a unique challenge, considering that at any one time, only about 7% of the consuming public is in "tire-purchase mode," says Joey Viselli, director of marketing services for North American Tire. This is why spoon-feeding key terms that stick to consumers is that much more important.

"When they eventually... are ready to buy, we don't need them to remember the brand," Viselli says. "We want them to ask for the Kevlar, to ask for the carbon fiber, to ask for the tire with the triple treads."

Much of Goodyear's shift to be more consumer-friendly can be attributed to Viselli's arrival in early 2004 after more than a decade at Procter & Gamble. He brought the concept of total communications planning, where marketing, advertising, and PR serve as the three legs of the stool supporting Goodyear's communications initiatives.

Goodyear also wants to generate more excitement with publicity stunts and buzzwords, simply because selling tires is unlike selling any other product.

"If I worked for Apple and wanted a reporter to write about the iPod Nano, I would mail him one," Sinclair says. "I can't really drop a set of Goodyear tires in the mail."

AT A GLANCE

Company:

Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.

CEO:

Robert Keegan

Headquarters:

Akron, OH

Revenues and latest earnings:

\$18.4 billion for fiscal year 2004

Competitors:

Bridgestone, Continental AG, Michelin

Key trade publications:

Tire Business, Tire Review, Modern Tire Dealer

Marketing budget:

Approximately \$40 million (North America only)

PR budget:

Approximately \$1 million (North America only)

Marketing/Comms Team:

SVP of global comms, Chuck Sinclair

VP of PR and comms (North American Tire), Ed Markey

Director of marketing services (North American Tire), Joey Viselli

Marketing services agencies:

PR: Coyne Public Relations
Advertising: McCann Erickson
Media planning and buying: MPG

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