

Seek, not set, audience for growth

OPINION

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Nihar Das, Global Business Lead at MediaCom, explains how unlocking future growth will rely on not using or looking for the proverbial key.

Halo Top Ice Cream is an eight-year-old brand and now the United States' top-selling ice cream pint. It was launched by two lawyers that had no experience in ice cream manufacturing and it has gone on to beat decade-old brands like Ben & Jerry's, Häagen-Dazs and Nestlé to number one. From 2016 to 2019, it experienced a 25000% growth in sales from initially churning 1,000 gallons every couple of months, to almost 12,000 gallons a day.

So, how did these men in suits perform this miracle? In 2013, Halo Top had initially launched as a low-fat ice cream, predictably targeting people looking for a healthy

indulgence within health-led supermarkets. But after three years of barely breaking even, they paused to realise the futility of their existing marketing model. Their fundamental assumption about their target audience – the current category buyers of ice creams – just wasn't working.

Looking for answers, they decided to see if growth could come from any other unfamiliar pockets. Fast forward seven years and today, 70% of their buyers have been sourced from outside the traditional ice cream category.

They noticed that some consumers were purchasing and consuming their ice cream every night—contrary to the known category behavior of ice cream as an occasional, impulse-based snack. As they dug deeper, they realised that these consumers were also protein users, who would use Halo Top in their shakes as a better-tasting blending medium because of its low calorie, high protein and better-tasting content. With this unique discovery, they rewrote every rule in the ice cream category: packaging that heroes their nutritional credentials over the brand, offering subscriptions, targeting gym-goers and fitness celebrities known as influencers, and churning out more flavors knowing consumers were eating them daily.

What Halo Top actually did was realise that audience growth has to be discovered, rather than simply assumed. The growth audience is unique to the distinctive brand offering. And the discovery process is often iterative. In the case of Halo Top, by seeking to discover their audience instead of assuming who it should be, Halo Top grew the category as its biggest source of volume came from nutritional health bars, yoghurt and spreads, instead of ice cream.

So how can we reapply this for our own brands and seek unfamiliar audiences in unfamiliar places? The process of discovery of growth audience is unique to the market data availability. Halo Top used home panel data that allowed them to examine the adjacent buying behavior of other categories against the current brand buyers. However, when this is not available, the same can be achieved by using a custom algorithm to seek the growth audience.

For example, a French lawnmower brand discovered most new buyers were coming from rural French-German borders through using a custom algorithm in programmatic buying – when the demographic and geographic filters were removed, which was part of their age-old target audience definition.

Similarly, in India, a premium life insurance company discovered their highest growth through less affluent, Hindi language-speaking belts in the heartland states. They were mostly sourced from Hindi language publishers. It was completely at odds to the current belief, that their audience were affluent, living in big cities, only consuming English language content – such beliefs were manifested in how demo, geo and language filters were set, thus excluding a majority of the new growth sources.

The "WHO", or the target audience has been the starting point of classical marketing. It still is. However, the future of growth belongs to those who dare to discover, rather than those who succumb to assume.

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