
Chapter Seven

Advertising to a Professional Audience - Sweeney's Revenge

The books, the career counselor and the soul-searching helped me come to this conclusion: I love advertising. I wanted to stay in the ring. But I can change the venue.

I was persuaded to join a smaller agency in New Jersey with a niche expertise in health care products. Sweeney & Partners was set in the rolling hills of Montvale, New Jersey in a modest office park kind of neighborhood. It seemed a million miles from the rat-race of Midtown Manhattan. Tom Sweeney is President and principal owner of the company. He is a real life entrepreneur. His background includes an undergraduate degree from Notre Dame, dropping out of medical school and a first job as a detail man for a large drug manufacturer. This background and his entrepreneurial spirit added up to a formula for success as niche marketing specialist catering to over-the-counter (OTC) and ethical pharmaceutical companies - of which there is no shortage in New Jersey.

Tom Sweeney caught me at the right time with an offer that hinted at autonomy, growth and maybe an equity stake down the road. Tom preached the advantages of specialized, integrated marketing. He hated big agencies. I was hooked. I was already convinced that a change of venue was a good idea and I was excited about being a bigger fish in a smaller pond. I accepted a position as an Account Group Supervisor managing the Richardson-Vicks and Pfizer accounts at Sweeney & Partners. I bit the bullet on salary in exchange for the prospect of a less complicated agency environment and the implied equity carrot.

Sweeney & Partners is an entrepreneurial organization built around the strengths of its founder. Tom Sweeney had a formula that could be customized for all of his accounts. He was able to offer a value that bigger agencies didn't have the energy or

desire to provide. He, by virtue of his background, understands what it takes to help relatively junior marketing managers in giant drug companies. He knows how to guide these “low branches” with his bag of tricks. In a nutshell, he could offer his clients significant value and beat the big advertising agencies. And make a tidy profit too. Here’s what Tom’s agency typically offered. Not brain surgery but pretty practical service and solid thinking.

Tom Sweeney’s Bag of Tricks

1. Database Marketing

Tom recommends one-to-one marketing. He says that professional healthcare providers and Pharmacists would have a huge influence on the success of a drug product. That seems true enough. This was especially true of ethical (prescription) drug products. Tom’s twist is to build the list and own it. Sweeney & Partners owns a custom list of high volume denture making dentists (HVDM) for example. As long as Tom keeps this information, Richardson-Vicks (a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble) relies on Sweeney & Partners to manage an ongoing sampling program and direct response dialogue with this important audience. Many big agencies would prefer not to manage such a list, opting instead to purchase it from a list-broker.

2. Medical Conventions and Scientific Sessions

Tom encourages his clients to participate in important medical conventions and scientific sessions. Sweeney & Partners designs and builds the show exhibits and will even provide staffing. While at the event, the staff of Sweeney & Partners will enter the names and addresses of participants on a laptop computer. You guessed it; those names become the database for Database Marketing (above). Again, this is a labor intensive process that most larger agencies don’t want to manage.

3. Journal Advertising

There are hundreds of specialized medical and healthcare

journals and publications. The cost to advertise in such publications is justified by the value of reaching a select audience. Sweeney & Partners spends a great deal of time understanding these publications and their relative importance in reaching professionals. It's a hassle for most traditional agencies. Tom's agency is happy to collect a commission on placing ads in any of these publications.

4. Focus Groups

Tom is an affable guy. He learned how to chat with doctors after dropping out of medical school and becoming paid detail man. Tom is the moderator in countless focus groups on topics ranging from brand perception to patient-doctor interaction. The client begins to understand its professional "influencer" audience. Sweeney & Partners earns an additional research fee. Most agencies hire a professional moderator and pay for their services. Few agencies have a person on staff who is more than willing to lead such sessions. (It works out especially well when Tom is required to travel to locations where a golf-course is accessible for an afternoon round.)

5. Select Consumer Tests

Tom is a marketing man. He's an entrepreneur, too. Whenever he's in a position to recommend taking a product story direct to consumers he will recommend a "test" of one sort or another. This is generally a low-level test of which a traditional agency wouldn't want to bother. Tom might suggest something like, "Let's run ads in Modern Maturity Magazine. Small Space. Maybe Black & White. We can see if people will sample your product. This will result in trial and that could lead to product sales." This is where Tom steps over the line between his professional audience expertise and into the arena of consumer-oriented efforts. Nevertheless, Tom is successful on occasion in convincing a marketing manager to invest in this type of "test" for a portion of their budget.

Tom Sweeney's agency is built completely around his abilities and personality. Clients demand his personal attention. He

spreads himself pretty thin. He insists on managing the agency's money (receivable and payable). Inevitably he runs into periodic cash-flow problems. I was in no position to ride-out the storm. It was time to change the venue, again.