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Strategic Perspective

Beginning Your Cotton Promotional Program on a Reasonable Budget

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Creating domestically focused promotion programs to increase world consumption of cotton is the focus of our workshop. We can probably all agree that fiber promotion at the retail level increases sales of cotton products, and thereby increases sales of raw cotton. There have been many examples of international program successes to substantiate that idea.

But today we are talking about the next generation of cotton promotion. We are talking about increasing consumer cotton demand in your own markets within your own countries, through locally funded and implemented promotional programs. Domestic promotion programs are aimed at serving the markets you know best, the markets you have the easiest access to, and of course the markets where you can have maximum control of your activities. And needless to say, you need to know your markets, understand your customer and examine how best to communicate with them.

But let's talk about how to get started on a program, and how to implement it with a reasonable budget. We'll also talk about the elements of a program and some promotional tools that can be used; some funding mechanisms, how to invest those funds to multiply the overall impact and how to sustain the effort. And most importantly, how the IFCP can help you facilitate your

program.

Determining the Objective — A Frame of Reference

We must first establish objectives in order to be successful. Clearly, everyone's objectives will vary somewhat, but what everyone's objectives have in common is that they must be specific and obtainable. If you are able to establish some objectives that are realistic for your promotional effort, the path becomes clearer.

And so it is important to realize that domestically aimed enhancement programs are not expected to outspend enormous chemical fiber promotion budgets. The kind of programs we want to foster are funded and managed domestically, and they benefit your domestic cotton industries by increasing consumer preference for cotton relative to man-made fibers in your market.

By focusing your promotion domestically, you manage the scope of that promotion, and you then can control your competitive environment more successfully. Working in a market that you are intimately familiar with and connected to presents strong advantages, including a better understanding of your target consumer that will help you to more easily and effectively influence fiber preferences.

A domestic demand enhancement program presents fewer complications and can more easily be implemented with limited resources. When you control the promotional landscape you can function with agility and precision. The amounts of money that you need for promotional spending will generally be far less with a domestic promotion than with an internationally aimed program because you have a smaller market population to penetrate, and the promotional vehicles are usually less expensive than international media. If you choose to utilize a logo in your promotional strategy, it is easier to monitor proper and improper logo usage. Overall, it is easier to protect intellectual property and authenticity within your country boundaries — far easier and less costly than trying to monitor international infractions. But of course, not everyone will choose a program based on a mark, whether it be for certification mark or for collective marketing.

And so, simply stated, your objective is to create or redesign the landscape of your promotional playing field to the advantage of cotton. The way to accomplish this is to limit the geographic and product promotion scope to circumstances that you can control. Make it your game.

Promotion programs can be complex, or they can be very simple in structure, but they all have certain circumstances and elements in common.

Most fiber promotion programs begin with a crisis, and that crisis is usually a drop in market

share. A few people (or a few companies or organizations) realize that something must be done, and they then form a core group. This core group must invest the time and energy to bring the program forward, or at least to get it started. It doesn't take many people to move a promotional effort forward, but it does take a concerted effort. Without this group of individuals, a program can't happen.

That core group then usually extends invitations downstream (or upstream) making sure that interested segments of the industry are represented, and this group of individuals usually evolves into the organization that 'houses' the effort.

A fiber promotion company needs an organization for legal and management reasons. This 'residence' for the promotion is called different things in different countries (i.e. associations, societies, promotion boards, etc.) but it is usually structured legally as a domestic non-profit organization, and has a board of directors made up of interested parties. This organization will manage the intellectual property and the administration, including membership issues, financial issues, and more. But as important as this organizational structure is, in many ways it is not the core of the promotional activity itself. It does not have to be formally set up before activities begin, and usually does not have to be formalized until the effort gets underway. Don't wait for the organization to be formed. You will wait too long.

In summary, if you feel strongly about developing a domestic cotton program, call someone in your industry that you think may have similar interests. Discuss your objectives with them, and begin to plan. Get the right people involved from the beginning of the process, and don't let the organizational structure development slow you down.

The Core Group and Strategic Alliances

The promotion itself is primarily driven by the strategic alliances that are formed between the organization and customers from the fiber-through-retail supply chain. The most important task with which to charge someone who is developing a cotton promotion program is to focus on developing strategic alliances with retailers and manufacturers (if they exist in your market place), and to participate as much as possible in the supply chain. That's what engineered fiber selection, education programs, and consumer ads have in common. Producers need to know where their product goes, and consumers need to know where their products come from, from point of origin through consumer satisfaction. But this is not to imply that one needs to work with a textile mill or manufacturer. Some of the most successful programs place their focus at the retail level, whether it be for branded product or private label collections, to communicate more closely with the consumer. And the promotion activity must insinuate itself into that supply chain as much as possible, and as seamlessly as possible. Your customers and their customers are the pathways that help you pull your cotton messages through to retail, and the closer you can

establish partners to the point of sale, the more the consumer can relate your product. The idea of "cotton" is enticing, but not as enticing as a "cotton towel".

Communicating directly with the consumer is usually very expensive, whether through broadcast or print — so much so that it often becomes impractical for most beginning programs. Most of the ways to 'talk' to the consumer are through retail channels, which is why these strategic alliances with retailers become so important.

And so to accomplish this communication with consumers, find a few manufacturers or retailers that currently advertise and promote their own product lines. These companies understand the value of promotion already, and will be more open to promotional ideas that cost money. You don't need many retail partners to start out with; you just need one or two. The program will grow in its own given time, and at this point, it is likely that a new program doesn't have the resources to support more than a few efforts in a meaningful way. Better to focus the resources now and demonstrate small successes. This will bring sustainability later.

Begin discussions with these customers close to retail about working together to develop a program that focuses on products made from cotton, either pure or a blend. Bring them in on the logo development by asking their opinions at different points of the artwork and strategy development process. If the program works for their customers, it will work for you.

The Logo

Having a logo does not mean that you have a promotion program. You can also have a program without a logo, but I've never seen that. The logo becomes a focal point, a rallying point, something to tie your image to. Logo development often becomes expensive and emotional, but it doesn't have to. I'm happy to answer any questions that you might have about logo development or mark protection later today or at another meeting, but time does not permit us to go any deeper at this time. Suffice it to say, the IFCP is here to facilitate information like this. Groups like Cotton SA and COTTON USA have years of experience in this. It's at your fingertips.

So at this point, you have a group of interested individuals with like objectives, a strategic alliance with at least one (preferably more than one) partner that produces your products that meet your criteria, a product collection that exemplifies your objectives, and a logo that your group is satisfied with. What now?

The Elements of Your Communication Strategy

We've heard about a lot of interesting programs today, and they all have some basic things in common. The first thing I noticed in reviewing the programs beforehand is that they all recognize

that a promotion strategy is just one element of an overall communication strategy. That overall communication strategy must include promotional vehicles, but also should consider an advertising strategy, a public relations strategy, media strategy, and a coordinated sales strategy.

Here is an easy way to plan your communication strategy. Ask yourselves these five key questions: What results are you looking for? Who do you want to communicate with? What do you want to say? How will you say it? And, who do you want to say it for you?

The answers to these questions are not complicated, nor particularly difficult to arrive at. The results that you are looking for translate into your objectives. You want to communicate with your target audience; what you say is your message, how you say it and who says it will depend on whether you are focusing on the trade or the consumer, and the tools you will use.

An example of satisfying the objective (the results we want) may be to get the consumer to look for cotton, or cotton-rich blends next time they are in a store, or looking at a catalogue. The target cotton customer of course, will be the one you have defined by age, demographics, etc. The cotton message is well established through research, the international programs, and publications, and there is a great deal of free cotton-rich photography available. You don't need to create a lot of original and costly material in order to begin a promotion program. The decision of whether your focus is on the trade or the consumer will have a lot to do with your budget.

You then must decide how you want to deliver your message. You may wish that your promotional communications follow the direct product flow ('push strategy'), or circumvent the product flow and go directly to the consumer ('Pull strategy'), or combine both push and pull, which is usually the most effective.

After you have answered all of these questions, you can then look at the techniques you have seen presented today and those that are contained in the second edition of Cotton Promotion Activities from Around the World, published by the IFCP for this meeting. But you will look at these techniques differently; because if you have fully answered the above questions, you will know which promotion techniques are right for you, and how to combine those techniques with the right advertising, the right public relations message, and the sales support to make your promotion meaningful.

More: Jeffrey P. Silberman's bio

*The International Forum for Cotton Promotion exists to help you realize effective and affordable communication and promotion strategies. We need you to support the organization, and to join the organization. If we can work together to increase cotton consumption in your domestic markets, we will have worked together to improve cotton's position in the world marketplace.

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