

9 1/2 ways

Do You Speak **Geek?**

How to build a bond with those who favor brains over brawn

BY JOE MULLICH

Forget about the revenge of the nerds. The technology elite are now called "geeks," thank you very much, and they've gone beyond revenge to earn respect as a potent market segment. Geeks are smart, but skeptical (think Bill Gates, Mark Cuban), and savvy marketers need to approach them in the right forums, with the right messages, in the right style. Here are some ways to reach and win over this important audience:

1 Use nerd word of mouth. Mozilla, maker of the Firefox browser, has developed a strong online community of supporters, including developers who create open source code that interfaces with the product. These users talk about ways to make the product work better and even interact publicly with the management team through blogs and other online mechanisms. Gaming companies have done the same thing, developing online communities that let customers become critics and even creators of their products. "These companies are growing their business through nerd word of mouth much more effectively than [they would] by creating old-world marketing and advertising programs," says Robbie Baxter, a principal consultant with Peninsula Strategies in Menlo Park, Calif. The key is to give geeks "jobs" in these communities, such as making them moderators.

2 Don't fix all the bugs. Geeks love to beta-test. "They have a strong desire to have the latest phone, computer and gadget even before all the bugs have been worked out," says Joshua Estrin, president of Concepts in Success, a consulting firm in Plantation, Fla. "In fact, some bugs are what excite this niche. If they can redesign or update a product, you might be looking at the next Bill Gates." At the very least, allow this hands-on group to test the products in stores before they buy.

3 Employ the "Woody Allen factor." In your marketing materials, cast the geek as the hero. "And don't 'cool' them up," warns Greg Hunter, a copywriter at McKee Wallwork Cleveland, an advertising agency in Albuquerque, N.M. "Every geek believes his time is coming."

4 Get rational. Most consumer marketing starts with an emotional appeal and then closes the deal with rational reasons for making a purchase. Marketing to geeks should focus on the logic first, says Bob Bly, a technology copywriter in Dumont, N.J. For example, people

who buy semiconductors don't need to be sold on the benefit of using them; they want to know if the product meets specifications in terms of voltage, current and resistance.

5 Teach your customers well. In its annual study of engineers, McClenahan Bruer Communications, a high-tech PR and advertising firm in Portland, Ore., found that 74 percent of respondents said their job requires them to continually learn new things. Conclusion: Use education-oriented marketing programs to target professional geeks.

6 Forget the fancy packaging. Anything that feels like slick advertising turns geeks off. Bly recalls a client who tested two direct mail letters touting a financial book aimed at engineers. A straightforward, benefit-oriented pitch out-sold a glitzy, bells-and-whistles creative package by a wide margin.

7 Look to the movies. When in doubt, tie your message to such geek-friendly movies as *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings*. "With a little work, *Star Wars* can be used as a metaphor for pretty much any conceivable marketing message," Hunter says. Examples include the ad where a group of M&M's goes to "the dark side" and the one where Yoda uses the "force" to steal a Diet Pepsi.

8 Don't dumb it down. McClenahan Bruer's study found that engineers are twice as likely to want dinner with Stephen Hawking than with Julia Roberts. "Self-identified superiority that suggests intellectual challenges will appeal, as will acknowledgement of high intelligence," the study concludes. Consider marketing that uses games and puzzles. But don't forget Step 9 ...

9 Check your facts — because they will. The Arketi Group, an Atlanta-based marketing company, developed a direct mail campaign for the Swiss measurement firm Leica Geosystems that used a math equation. For marketing purposes, the answer was supposed to be the number one. Leica KO'd the plan because the equation only rounded up to one. The firm figured their audience would catch the flaw and write letters.

1/2 Speak their language. Jargon and buzzwords work for this segment. The hottest branding trend is to stick an iPod-inspired "i" in front of any product name, even cooling fans. ●



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