



Marketing Lessons Created By A Second-Grade Teacher

The out-of-nowhere success achieved by Airborne is a remarkable OTC case study whose lessons should be pondered by any serious marketer.

» The amazing thing about this story is that if you've read this far, you've probably already guessed which OTC product we're talking about. I know because after my own college-age kids began begging me to buy it (\$7.79 for 10 tablets) last winter, *guaranteeing* me that it would keep them from getting colds, because all their friends told them about it – and then my wife, an ele-

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mentary school teacher said that all her colleagues were talking about it – I got interested. No doubt, this was some kind of hurricane force, word-of-mouth phenomenon I was experiencing. And since I happened to be writing a book on the subject, it was imperative that I swing into action:

I launched a comprehensive, thumbnail research project. I went

down and asked the 10 people standing in the “12 Items or Less” line at the local supermarket: *Have you ever heard of something called Airborne?*

80% (8 people) said “Yes!”

Okay, what is it? And here's what's remarkable –

Nearly every one said the same thing: *“It's this stuff you take for colds. People swear by it. **It was invented by a second grade teacher.**”*

A second grade...*Real-ly?*

What was going on here?

It turns out, after a little reflection and an hour on Google, *quite a lot* was going on here that I think even the most sophisticated brand marketers could take vital lessons from, regardless of how you feel about this now controversial product. Because the fact is, it went from kitchen table to \$100 million-plus in national sales, No. 1 status in its supplement category, and almost universal awareness, in about five years. And that's *before* social networking and hyper-connected consumerism had yet hit critical mass.

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It must also be said that they eventually made some mistakes that were not intended, just unnecessary and surprisingly naïve—which lead to a now famous \$23.3 million class action settlement, which no brand would ever want dominating the first Google page. But that comes later.

Brand success is always due to a *series* of positive decisions and actions and from the beginning, Victoria Knight McDowell, the actual second-grade teacher and her husband, were doing everything not just right, but brilliantly.

WHAT THEY DID

The steps this marketing duo took are something that all of us should envy and emulate.

1. They Attached the Product to a Story: They took a simple, compelling story and leveraged it relent-



lessly in every component of expression. From their name to their packaging to their language and persona. The story worked because it touched an anti-corporate, non-pharma, cozily human and inherently plausible chord. *And they kept on saying it.* Sure, it was nonsensical to say: "Take your medical advice from a grade-school teacher, not a medical professional." But this school teacher wasn't recommending that you let her do open heart surgery. She was just a normal person, asking you to trust her because everybody knows that teachers face the cold and flu *torture test* every year: a classroom full of snuffle-nosed, coughing, sneezing little kids. She didn't start out to make money. She did it to defend herself and her teacher colleagues. *It just happened to work so well, everyone else wanted it too!* You can't blame a normal person for doing that.

The little story may have been nonsensical to me or any MBA-trained marketer working for a big company. But it made all the sense in the world to her audience. It was believable. And the "trust me I'm a teacher" part was so unusual and refreshing, it turned out to be irresistible.

2. Then they Provided the Micro-scripts – They gave us these special sound bites, these memorable talking points, so we could say and repeat that story quickly and accurately to others – in a phone call, in a text or a tweet. These so called Micro-scripts just happen to be the gas you put into the great digital word-of-mouth machine that helps you go viral:

"It's the cold supplement that was invented by a second-grade teacher."

"It's the one you take before you get on an airplane."

"It builds up your immune system."

"Flight attendants swear by it."

Notice that none of these are necessarily taglines, although the words "Created by a School Teacher" do

appear on the box. They're viral magic, designed to be spoken across the backyard fence or the Internet. I heard people telling me the same Micro-scripts over and over, which is how I knew they *were* successful Micro-scripts. This tool is becoming a critical one for the new era marketer.

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AIRBORNE CONNECTS VIA ADJACENT ENDORSEMENT

BY BOB HOGAN

Adjacent Endorsements: Making a dramatic entrance through the side door.

Regardless of how you feel about the product or some of the ethics lines it may have walked, you have to agree that Airborne struck marketing gold with the whole Second-Grade-Teacher thing. This is what I call an "adjacent endorsement".... one given not by the obvious professional expert, but by a less decorated, but almost equally trusted expert. The world of marketing communications has several classic examples of success achieved via this route.

In the early days of consumer advertising of Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol, the agency was all set to trot out the old "recommended by more doctors" claim (which was true on an individual brand – not generic – basis) but wanted something more distinctive and powerful. It turned out that hospitals actually prescribed Tylenol more than all aspirin brands combined. While this was because of the product's combined pain-reducing ability and absence of post-operative anti-clotting, it essentially said to consumers that the place you go when you are *really* hurting uses Tylenol. Bingo. How many decades did the brand stick with that one?

At the risk of dating myself, let us not forget Madge, the earthy beautician who would casually inform her trusting clients that they were soaking their dishpan hands in dishwashing liquid.... Palmolive, to be exact. But not to worry; Palmolive was tough on dishes but mild on hands. And who would know better than good old Madge, who in her day saw many a flock of flaky phalanges, but more important was the great ear and confidante of aspiring suburban housewives all of over the country. No dermatologist or hand-model recommendations here. Just a trusted old friend at the salon. Cha-ching.

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It's the subject of the book I mentioned: *The Micro-script Rules: How ideas break through in the hyper-connected world* (first-edition eBook downloadable as of May).

3. The Name – They gave it a name that was not only simple to say and easy to remember, *it was a descriptive word* that called out the product's modus operandi – fighting airborne germs in coughs and sneezes. But the name naturally suggested another utility that I suspect was originally inadvertent – yet the smart Airborne people *listened* and jumped on it nonetheless. It was another vivid torture test they could "own." As we all know, the world's other great illness incubator besides second grade, is in the stale, re-circulating air of an aircraft cabin. So, Airborne marketers began reminding the audience what the name already implied: *Airborne was custom designed to prevent sickness before traveling on an airplane.* "Second-grade classrooms" and "airplanes" – two proprietary nightmares that framed the problem and solution. A large number of the random group of people I keep interviewing bring this up, right after mentioning the teacher – *oh yeah, "you take it before you fly on a plane."*

4. Cartoon Graphics and Funny Advertising Leveraged the Persona. You could say that cold remedies are serious medicine and that the cartoons on the box are inappropriate. Or you could decide, like our second-grade teacher did, that it reinforces the approachable, friendly, un-corporate message and persona of the brand. The thousands of loyal Airborne customers agree.

5. They Utilized Viral, Electronic Word of Mouth Techniques Before It Was Mainstream. This is most likely because products concocted

by teachers in their kitchens don't start out with any marketing budget. But Airborne appears to have been creating communities of user/champions, sponsoring homemade video contests and generally facilitating word-of-mouth very early in the game. Very nimble and very smart.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

The school teacher and her company were so savvy in so many areas, it's surprising they allowed themselves to fall into a very public, unsubstantiated claims dispute, culminating in an image-damaging

“They gave it a name that... called out the product's modus operandi.”

lawsuit – but that's what happened in 2006. This may have been the down side of the lack of big company experience that the "reluctant entrepreneurs," as they called themselves, prided themselves in.

This side of the story goes like this: Starting in the late 1990s, sales began more than doubling annually – until the second-grade teacher found herself on Oprah for 20 minutes, telling her dramatic saga. From this point on, they couldn't keep Airborne on the shelves. But neither could they, from here on, fly below the radar. Their implied claim of significant common cold prevention by a home grown recipe of herbs and vitamins was seen as crossing the line. Critics pointed out that the only

"independent" clinical study ever performed had been done by company employed individuals without any real credentials.

Airborne reportedly settled the class action for \$23.3 million. It was unquestionably harmful to this brand built on homespun trust. Today, the official product claim is that it "supports your body's immune system," a passable statement for a school teacher's vitamin recipe.

While actual sales figures weren't possible to obtain, the packages I found on the drugstore shelf still say "#1 one seller in the USA!" The product is established enough to have spawned a generic version at CVS in three flavors, right next to it on the shelf. By any measure, Airborne was and is a remarkable OTC success story whose lessons should be pondered by any serious marketer.

Because although the tale has a cautionary side, it doesn't outweigh a remarkable brand achievement. If you doubt that, just go stand in any check-out line and ask the person next to you about Airborne.

Chances are you'll hear all about the second grade teacher – like she just invented it yesterday. <<

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