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Organization: Argyle Rowland Communications
Division: #6.2: Communications Management: Multi-Audience Communication — Private
Title of entry: Hanson Brick: Launching North America’s largest brick manufacturer
Time period: January – May 2003
Brief description: This multi-faceted, trilingual public relations campaign supported a merger of seven brick companies into one North American brand. Communications targeted 2,000 employees and hundreds of major customers across the United States and Canada, seeking to retain the brand equity of the former companies while demonstrating the benefits of the bigger brand.

I. Need / opportunity

In 1999, Hanson plc, one of the world’s largest building materials companies, bought seven brick companies across North America — in Texas, Kentucky, Michigan, the Carolinas, Ontario and Québec. After letting the companies retain their traditional identities for several years, Hanson decided that by April 2003, they would be consolidated into one company, with one brand — “Hanson Brick.” The company’s headquarters would be in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Richard Manning, president and CEO of the new Hanson Brick, now led the largest brick maker in North America — but a big company isn’t necessarily a big brand. He still had to integrate 2,000 employees, who spoke three different languages, worked in seven different cultures, and had personal relationships with thousands of customers. Some of the companies had a hundred years or more of history behind them, and many employees and customers had mixed feelings about the acquisition.

In late 2002, Mr. Manning and his team engaged Argyle Rowland Communications to develop and implement a strategy to launch the new company to multiple audiences, with the most critical being customers and employees. The stakes were high. Protecting the company’s \$300 million in revenue meant transferring the brand equity from the seven former companies to the new one — and positioning the new Hanson Brick for future success in a very competitive market.

II. Intended audience

Our key target audiences were:

- ◆ **Customers and customer influencers** – e.g., builders, contractors, masons, architects, designers, specifications writers and property managers. These groups have several characteristics: predominantly male; managers/professionals; hard workers with busy lives and tight schedules.
- ◆ **Hanson Brick employees** — a culturally diverse group of 2,000 employees at 22 plants all over North America; many employees in Texas spoke primarily Spanish, while most employees in Québec (Canada) spoke French.
- ◆ **Local officials** in communities with Hanson Brick operations; and

- ◆ **Trade, business and consumer media**, both print and broadcast — a key conduit to all other audiences.

III. Goals & objectives.

We developed the following objectives for the campaign — some to ensure that audiences received our message, and some to ensure that they endorsed and/or acted on it.

- ◆ **Employee participation in pre-launch events:** We set a target of having 80% of employees attend launch events.
- ◆ **Employee retention and satisfaction:** We set a target of 90% employee retention after the merger — and achieving a 75% “positive” view of the benefits of the merger.
- ◆ **Customer participation in launch events:** We set a target of 60% attendance from those Hanson defined as “top-tier” customers. This was a reasonable target since these are typically very busy people — many of whom had to travel to attend the event in their region.
- ◆ **Customer retention:** While this would be difficult to measure, our clients believed the best “global” measure would be the maintenance of sales volumes from 2002 to 2003.
- ◆ **Broad “on-message” media coverage:** We set clear targets: (1) earning at least 50 mainstream and trade articles about the launch of Hanson Brick; (2) reaching an audience of at least 20,000,000; and (3) ensuring that the content and tone of coverage reflected our key messages.

IV. Solution overview.

Our first step was formal research (see work sample) into the views of our most critical audience groups — customers, customer influencers and employees of the seven former companies. The results pointed us in the right direction:

Customer views:

- ◆ Three-quarters of customers knew “very little” about Hanson, and so scores were low when evaluating benefits of the amalgamation; among those who had an opinion, customers saw an “expanded product range” as the key benefit;
- ◆ When asked to compare Hanson Brick companies to their major competitors, customers identified the following areas of greatest competitive advantage, in order: “highly professional staff,” “excellent product quality and technical support,” “excellent overall service,” and “excellent relationship with customers.”
- ◆ Hanson Brick’s sales staff were its best marketing tool, and were seen to be more effective than those of the competition.

Employee views:

- ◆ Employees from across the seven companies viewed the following, in order, as the new Hanson Brick’s greatest strengths: “employees are a significant strength”; “wide product range”; “excellent product quality and support”; and “excellent reputation.”
- ◆ Employees were highly enthusiastic about the benefits of their product and their people — and confident pitting these attributes against the competition.

- ◆ However, majorities of employees lacked both “a clear understanding of Hanson’s activities” and “an understanding of Hanson’s culture and values.” The benefits of amalgamation were not clear.
- ◆ There were some concerns linked to the loss of their regional identity and brand — and the credibility of information coming from management. This was likely due to the lack of familiarity with senior executives; after all, the buck now stopped in Charlotte, North Carolina — and ultimately in the U.K. — rather than in each region.

Armed with this information, the Argyle Rowland team developed the following strategies (see tactics for specific activities):

1. **Rebrand through relationships.** Given customers’ comfort with their longstanding relationship with Hanson staff and employees’ confidence in themselves and their products, we knew that rebranding success would depend on the accurate transmission of messages from Hanson management to employees, and from both management and employees to customers. Given the perceived remoteness of Hanson’s senior management, the campaign would build and enhance relationships between them and front-line staff in each region.
2. **National brand, regional dimensions.** We determined that to “sell” the benefits of being part of a bigger, stronger company, Hanson Brick needed a big, strong, single North American brand. However, given the considerable equity in regional identities and relationships, we would develop branding and public relations strategies that showed respect for the regional roots of the seven companies.
3. **Use direct and indirect channels to reach audiences.** Given the relationship-building focus of the campaign, we undertook to organize a series of events at which Hanson’s management would interact with staff and customers. In addition, we would reach all audiences through the media.
4. **The message: Great products, great people.** In our key messages, imagery and events, we would lead with our acknowledged strengths by highlighting the beauty, quality and durability of building with brick, and the skill and service of Hanson’s people across the continent.
5. **“Launch month.”** To give a clear focus for both national media and local media in Hanson communities, we set a date (March 28, 2003) at which the seven Hanson companies would officially become one. In the weeks before the launch, employees would get personal visits from the president — plus extensive “information and celebration” material. In the weeks after the launch (i.e., April), there would be prominent local events for customers in each region, creating a platform for local media coverage. **Issues management and local community relations.** In a large manufacturing organization, there are always community relations issues; this is particularly true in the instance of a merger or takeover. We would give Hanson’s regional executives tools and training to manage local issues and communicate effectively to local governments, communities and media.

V. Implementation & challenges

Rebrand through relationships.

To build relationships with employees, we organized a “President’s tour” that took Richard Manning to 16 events for employees at all 22 of Hanson’s North American plants. At each location, he had a roundtable meeting with a representative group of employees, showed an exciting video about the new company, and made a presentation to all staff (with translation into French and Spanish where necessary). To ensure widespread dissemination and understanding of the message among employees, we provided message/media training to regional VPs (see below), and appointed local “brand ambassadors” in each region. The brand ambassadors delivered T-shirts, videos and key messages to every Hanson employee — even those who could not attend the President’s tour event.

To build relationships with customers, we organized a series of “one of a kind” celebration events in each region. The customer events were complex and varied: a day at the races in Lexington, Kentucky; a NASCAR driving experience in Charlotte, North Carolina; a barbecue cookout with quick-draw fighters and live country and western band in Dallas, Texas; an evening with a celebrity comedian in Old Montréal, Québec; and a hockey-themed evening with a Canadian NHL legend in Toronto, Ontario.

National brand, regional dimensions.

To showcase the beauty of brick while associating the Hanson brand with the regional strength and the heritage of the former companies, the team organized the company’s products into five “collections” — one for each region. Each was represented by a distinct icon: a leaf indigenous to the region. There was the Canada Collection (Maple leaf), Carolina Collection (Sweetgum leaf), Heartland Collection (Sycamore leaf), St. Laurent Collection (Birch leaf) and Texas Collection (Oak leaf).

To reinforce the regional dimension even further, we created “The Hanson Brick Art Collection.” We commissioned an artist in each region to create a beautiful watercolor or oil painting of a local brick landmark. Every customer who attended a launch event in April 2003 received a print of the painting representing their region, plus a set of note cards of the whole art collection.

Use direct and indirect channels to reach audiences.

In addition to the employee and customer events, we produced a special internal newsletter, *Hanson Brick Update*, to communicate information and build anticipation for the official launch.

To reach our audiences through the media channel, we took a segmented approach to media relations. For national trade and business media, we promoted the launch announcement on March 28th, securing interviews for the CEO with some of the biggest media outlets in North America. Then, we prepared regional VPs in each region for media relations work in and around their local customer launch events in April and May. Many industry trade journalists also attended events in their regions.

The message: Great products, great people.

We scripted, shot and produced a trilingual video that told the story of the new Hanson Brick — under the tagline “Great products. Great people.” The lively, animated presentation featured fast-moving images of products being made at plants across North America, and interviews with employees and customers from different regions.

We also applied this focus on the two key strengths of the Hanson Brick brand to the key messages used in news releases, executive speeches, the company’s new website and a range of other applications.

“Launch month.”

Hanson Brick was officially launched on March 28, 2003, at the industry’s largest annual trade show in Orlando, Florida. Richard Manning spent much of the day doing mainstream business media interviews by phone, and in-person trade media interviews at the show. Throughout April and early May, the launch “unfolded” for employees and customers across North America, with customer launch events — and media interviews and coverage — in each region.

Issues management and local community relations.

In early 2003, we conducted media training sessions for both senior management and all eight of Hanson’s regional vice-presidents. This ensured they were clear and consistent in delivering corporate launch messages at the local level, and equipped to handle a myriad of media, public and community questions on issues ranging from labour disruptions, plant openings and closings, and potential health and safety issues.

Budget.

With a budget of approximately \$560,000 for fees and expenses, our resources were limited, but sufficient to do the job with careful planning and organization. This budget included the organization of 16 employee events and five customer events across the continent; scripting, shooting and producing a corporate video; drafting and producing four issues of an employee newsletter; commissioning the Hanson Brick Art Collection; and waging an earned media campaign in selected target markets across North America.

Challenges.

We faced many challenges. Here are two of the most significant:

- ◆ **SARS:** Less than two weeks before the Toronto customer event, the World Health Organization issued an advisory cautioning visitors against travel to Toronto. With Hanson Brick’s most senior executives flying in for the occasion, we faced a difficult challenge: if they came, it meant explaining the reasons to others within the Hanson organization; if they did not, it meant explaining the reasons to Toronto-based customers. After a careful assessment of the risk and the preparation of a clear rationale, Richard Manning and his team came to Toronto. The message: “The WHO said postpone all but essential travel. We considered this to be essential.” The customers in the room responded with loud applause, and people throughout Hanson understood.

- ◆ **Organization:** Coordinating a massive North American campaign — with 16 employee events, a national media launch and five very complex customer events — was a huge

challenge, particularly since it all occurred between mid-February and early May. Our division of labour involved giving different members of our team “ownership” of different challenges: e.g., media training; media relations and issues management; employee communications — speeches and copywriting; “prime” organizational duties at customer events; VIP liaison; etc. We also developed close relationships in collaborating with Hanson Brick marketing and human resource staff in each region.

VI. Measurement / evaluation

In terms of its objectives, the launch of Hanson Brick was a success. The campaign’s achievements included:

- ◆ **Employee participation:** More than 90% of employees attended pre-launch events, and the remainder received our materials through our designated local brand ambassadors.
- ◆ **Employee satisfaction and retention:** Hanson Brick experienced turnover of less than 5%, despite the massive organizational changes. A survey on employee impressions of the merger is scheduled for the spring of 2004, but feedback from local human resource managers suggests very positive feedback and optimism about the company’s future.
- ◆ **Customer participation in launch events:** Among Hanson’s “top-tier” customers, more than 75% attended launch events. This success speaks to the attractiveness of the events to local customer audiences.
- ◆ **Customer retention:** At the end of 2003, Hanson’s commercial president reported this to a meeting of his sales force: “Our sales volumes were higher in 2003 than the previous year, and our profit is up — all in a year of tremendous challenge and change.”
- ◆ **Media coverage:** We earned 68 media articles that reached an estimated circulation of 59,000,000 North Americans. Content analysis indicated an overwhelmingly positive tone — with wide use of key messages and Hanson-produced photos and imagery.