



THE DIY PHENOMENON

by Larry Kaagan and Patricia Graham

Leveraging consumers' can-do spirit is a powerful marketing tool in a host of businesses.

“If you want it done right, do it yourself.”

It's been said by generations of people, for all kinds of reasons. But the sentiment that lies behind that simple statement—a sense of taking greater personal control and responsibility for what's important in one's life—has been slowly but steadily emerging in more and more aspects of our culture. While Baby Boomers are more inclined to see products and brands as badges to wear, Gen Xers want information so that they can build their own products and services.

In many respects, the resurgence of DIY attitudes—fueled by the Internet and other resources—is an admonition to our fundamental social, political, and economic institutions to pay attention, to listen, to learn, and most important, to adapt. Marketers need to heed this call, deepening their understanding of the values and desires of this important group and leveraging this knowledge in product development, advertising, and promotion.

The rise of the current “do it yourself” culture arguably can be traced back to the postwar era of the 1940s and 1950s. Americans fresh from the front lines and the home-front factories that supplied them turned their proven skills and energies to building new and better lives. Families built homes and communities, bought cars, sought out more education and better jobs. And they invested more and more time in taking on the tasks that came with this new lifestyle. Homes needed improvements, cars inevitably required repairs—and the can-do spirit of the era soon turned into a discernible social phenomenon we came to call simply “DIY.”

PRIDE, THERAPY—AND SAVINGS

For some, the DIY spirit was driven by necessity—the simple need to save money. Others just found it faster and more convenient to solve their own problems than to be at the mercy of notoriously

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unpredictable service providers. For others, it reflected a personal pride of accomplishment, and provided a therapeutic “grounding” that fed self-esteem. By the end of the century, the concept of self-reliance had expanded to become a virtual template for American life.

Government was one of the first social institutions to see the power of the phenomenon. With service demands rising faster than financial resources, governments at every level of society faced the cold, hard reality of saying “no” to additional spending on social programs. New ways of answering community service demands had to be found. Traditional religious, charitable, and social institutions shouldered more of the load, backed by tax incentives and rising public support for their efforts. Corporate giving to social needs also assumed a larger and more prominent role in promoting the public good and community improvement.

But in ever-increasing numbers, community and voluntary groups also have joined the cause, as recognized in a national program celebrating public service called the 1,000 Points of Light. Self-help and self-empowerment groups proliferated, as more and more individuals embraced the idea that people helping themselves and helping others can indeed make a big difference for the better.

Rising problems with federal funding also have assumed an equally personal dimension involving individual financial security, with important repercussions for the spirit of self-reliance. As federal, state, and local

budget problems gained wider and wider attention, people also recognized their vulnerability to reliance on the Social Security system that had been presumed to be the bedrock financial safety net for an aging population. Government’s ability to meet its obligations has become an open question. To make the uncertainties even more troublesome, reports of underfunded and bankrupt private and corporate pension programs also have become standard news of the day.

People once were advised to “get a piece of the rock.” For more and more people today, the better advice is to “be your own rock.” For those with the DIY spirit, the right reaction to rising worries about the ability of traditional institutions to meet their individual financial needs is to take greater personal control—to think more about what they can do to build their financial security, and less about how to find someone willing and able to do that job for them.

NOT JUST FOLLOWING “DOCTOR’S ORDERS”

In healthcare, the DIY phenomenon has become perhaps even more visible. Generations of Americans were taught that their health was the province of doctors and the medical establishment. But as more

and more of the decision-making process in health has shifted to large, often impersonal, managed care companies, a do-it-yourself spirit has emerged.

Patients and consumers today want to be less dependent on “the system” for information and to be more actively involved in making personal healthcare decisions. People increasingly seek out information about healthcare—from the Internet, books, even other patients—rather than waiting to have information filter through the system to them. They want more collaboration and consultation, and less lecture and direction.

They’re also more willing to embrace alternatives to traditional care, and will actively seek out new ideas and thinking about health. Recent NIH research indicates that well over one-third of Americans in a given year spend their own, nonreimbursed dollars on an array of “alternative” therapies in which no formal medical care is involved. From homeopathy to massage therapy, from home-testing kits to nutritional supplements, consumers have applied DIY principles to redefine the nature of healthcare in our society. The fact that they have taken control and in some ways thumbed their noses at the conventional experts in the field would have been virtually unthinkable twenty years ago.

In education, rising frustration with the quality of fundamental public education has generated a near explosion in activism. The roster of parents taking DIY to a literal level through home schooling has grown dramatically. Even those not willing to go this far in self-reliance demand ever-greater involvement in all aspects of the public



educational system, from traditional parent-teacher support groups to curriculum review and planning. The concept of charter schools has become a prominent feature in educational debates across the country.

Other basic government institutions are not immune to the trend. Today, the number of private security guards exceeds the number of law enforcement officers in the United States. Nearly 16 million Americans live in gated communities, often governed in large part through community regulations written by self-created homeowner associations. Enrollment in self-defense classes has tripled since 1980.

TELECOM MIX AND MATCH

It wasn’t that long ago that we all relied on a single entity—a regulated monopoly affectionately called Ma Bell—to manufacture phones and switches, with local subsidiaries



handling installation and maintenance, and providing local and long-distance telephone service.

But beginning in 1984, American consumers were plunged into the era of DIY telecommunications. Changes in public policy ushered in the sister concept of self-reliance—*choice*—in telecommunications. *Choose your phone. Choose your local, long-distance—and, later, cell phone—carrier.*

Smart marketers have responded by looking for ways to get consumers more involved, and to feel more in control during the purchase process. Home Depot and Lowe's generated rapid growth by embracing the self-reliance mindset and giving consumers a wide array of the things that soon defined DIY in the marketplace—ease of access, hands-on contact with merchandise, self-selection, even instructional assistance. In a relatively short time, these retailers not only *accommodated* the self-reliance

trend but *embodied* it—and in the process thrived and helped define the entire DIY phenomenon in the consumer mind.

The DIY market may well have been proven in the public's mind by the Lowe's and Home Depot model. But there are a thousand permutations of the notion, and they are equally instructive for marketers. Here are a few DIY rules and applications:

Let them build their own products. The rise of Dell as a leader in the computer industry was driven by the company's focus on giving individual consumers control over the precise characteristics of their computer. "You're getting a Dell" became synonymous with "Here's *your* computer," not "*a* computer." Car buyers can "construct" their own vehicles online, adding bells and whistles in different combinations and seeing the cost differences instantly. And the DIY music device known as iPod is already taking the place of CD players for Boomers and Gen Xers alike, showing that mainstream consumers are not averse to the effort of building and managing their own library of songs—in exchange for greater flexibility and control.

Easy access to information is a must. Making the right choice depends on having the right information. In today's busy world, that means easy access, and better organization, to deliver information crisply to busy consumers. Two industry verticals—retail and automotive—amplify the opportunity. Retailers who help speed consumers to and through the information needed to make the right choice—the choice that satisfies the DIYer's drive for self-reliance—gain an edge over those who don't.

Witness the rise of online travel providers who help consumers assemble the best, most cost-efficient travel package from all possible choices. (And witness the demise of those who don't.) After seeing Expedia and other rivals surge ahead, Priceline.com has recently changed its site functionality to allow users greater control over the airlines and other details of their flights.

In the automotive industry, the days of customers waiting nervously while a salesperson retreats behind the magic curtain to consult with “my sales manager” have been largely displaced. Consumers have discovered that having more information—about actual costs, standard markups, and competitive alternatives—takes much of the mystery out of the purchase process. The higher the value of the product involved, the greater the willingness to seek out that relevant information.

Seed your messages in high-value environments. Many marketers also have recognized that the tectonic shift in information availability has influenced attitudes toward advertising, and the larger issue of how consumers develop a frame of reference in decision making. Fewer customers (especially for higher-value products) seem willing to accept advertising as the sole means of making purchase decisions. To convince a skeptical DIYer, getting your product mentioned in the instructional article he or she is reading is often more powerful than having a full-page ad nearby.

Sometimes, more is less. While DIY consumers do not all have the same needs across verticals and products, most are also busy people adept at setting priorities. Faced

with *too much* choice, they may cut and run rather than dwell on finding precisely the right product. Winning DIYers' hearts means recognizing that different situations and needs create different priorities; a plethora of information and options can be a turnoff when the stakes are low—so you need to gauge when and where more is more, and when it may actually be less.

The marketplace lessons of DIY cannot be underestimated. Adapt to the new realities of rising public demand for more control and more involvement, or risk being “disintermediated.”

For whatever reason—financial need, personal satisfaction, frustration with the status quo—consumers have demonstrated a growing desire to take on the jobs that used to be the primary or exclusive province of key social institutions. People want to do it themselves. Recognize that the trend toward self-reliance is not a threat as much as an opportunity for those who can respond with the products and services that embrace the DIY spirit.

Larry Kaagan is President of Kaagan Research Associates. He can be reached at sextant@knowledge networks.com.

Patricia Graham is Knowledge Networks' Executive Vice President, Client Service and Business Development. She can be reached at pgraham@knowledge networks.com.