

stewart e. mchie

Common positioning for global Exxon, Esso, and Mobil brands forms basis for local campaigns in 80+ countries

For many people, the mention of ExxonMobil brings to mind the place to gas up, but for Stewart McHie, it's much more.

For the global brand manager at ExxonMobil Fuels Marketing, the brands of Exxon, Mobil, and Esso aren't simply gasoline; they represent ways to help drivers have a better experience on the road. Besides gasoline, there are many other services that drivers want regardless of their nationality or where they are traveling, whether it's fast service, local directions, clean facilities, or convenience store items.

When Mobil and Exxon merged in 1999 in a historic \$80 billion deal, one reason given for the consolidation was a need for greater efficiency in an industry under great price pressures. That meant that advertising and marketing needed to be efficient too, all across the 80+ countries where products and services were sold under the three brands.

"We told ourselves we would not compromise the effectiveness of what we did to save money," McHie says. "We still had an obligation to provide the very best communications we could."

A 29-year veteran of the company, McHie earlier led the repositioning of the Exxon brand in the U.S. from a product-centric to a consumer-centric offering and later expanded the program to include the Esso brand outside the U.S. With the merger of Exxon and Mobil, the role of managing the brands globally went to McHie.

To get a better understanding of the customer, McHie undertook a major global research project concerning attitudes about life on the road. He knew going in that today is an increasingly mobile world and that people are pressed for time. From the research, the company learned that "despite the differences in geographic regions and cultures, the frustrations felt about driving were quite common—from Miami to Cairo to Sydney," says McHie.

There is frustration from congestion and aggressive driving and even having to stop for gasoline, especially when it's inconvenient. What

became clear from the findings is that drivers everywhere want a better experience when they do stop to refuel and refresh, he says.

That was enough to assure McHie that there was common ground on which the three brands—Exxon, Mobil, and Esso—could use the same basic positioning for all customers around the world and go to market in the same way. That positioning became "enhancing life on the move."

Says McHie, "Once we developed that as a strategic platform, we did a lot of work over the next year to develop a communications platform."

McHie knew if the company could design a clever communications platform that looked like it was local and do it centrally, there would be tremendous efficiency as well as effectiveness. Smaller countries would benefit especially because with their small budgets, they never had been able to produce the same level of quality communications before, he explains.

In order to convey that the marketer understands what life on the move is all about, the friendly phrase—"we're drivers too,"—appears on most of the communications around the world. This also conveys that the people at ExxonMobil when they are driving want the same conveniences, everything from quality fuels to fast service, clean restrooms, convenience store items, and an easy payment system.

With its agency DDB Worldwide, the company has created a full program of materials that can be adapted for use around the world. For television commercials, the agency shoots a series of

Stewart McHie helps

ExxonMobil enhance

life on the move.





In Hong Kong, bus shelters (above) outfitted to look like a real outlet with dispensers were so realistic that people stopped to try and fill up. The company also outfitted toll booths —as many as 20 across—to introduce the Synergy fuel system.



vignettes that focuses on customers, not products, and how they engage with the products. These are shot in three- and four-second clips using a number of different casts representing different nationalities, and the segments can be mixed and matched depending on the message desired in each market.

Paul Price, who manages the ExxonMobil account at DDB Worldwide, says through this process ExxonMobil has made overwhelming progress on behalf of the three Esso, Mobil, and Exxon brands in finding efficiencies without losing effectiveness.

For example, according to McHie, the company has cut spending on the production of television spots from \$30 million a year to \$8.5 million.

“With the new approach, we were able to produce a tool kit we’ve used now going on four years,” he says. The contents of the “tool kit” runs the gamut from TV spots to global fountain cup templates, including banners, mailers, and pump toppers.

He also attributes success to the partnership the company has created with the agency. “We’ve worked hard on developing a very efficient and effective integrated marketing model. I don’t consider DDB to be (just) an advertising agency. They are a marketing services company, providing all marketing services that we require,” McHie says.

“While that in itself doesn’t sound unusual since most large agencies can (do that), what has been unique is rather than just accumulate a number of competencies, they have truly integrated those for us. I don’t have to deal with six or seven different people throughout the organization. My contact is the integrator of this. To me that’s a key difference that sets DDB apart.”

McHie says he believes the agency is in the best position to do that and that he prefers to pay for that service rather than have a large internal staff. It is especially important for a company like his that is in a “low involvement category,” he says.

“We don’t feel we can rely on television as our primary means of communication. When you’re at home in your living room, you aren’t a consumer of our products. Television can be effective if we want to introduce a new concept like our ‘On the Run’ convenience stores or SpeedPass or loyalty program to get attention and awareness, but the purchase decision is made when they are in the car. So radio and out-of-home are important for us as well as on-site. Our customers are a captive audience for two-to-four minutes when they are buying fuel. We have an opportunity to speak to them there and when they are in the store.”

So DDB brings together competencies for a variety of communications for the company, including working with sister media planning and buying specialist OMD.

“Being able to think about new and unique ways to do things is important, and we have a lot of good examples of what the agency has brought to us including media planning. When you unleash them, they can be a very creative bunch.” ●