CASE STUDY

Elevation Marketing helps Western Refining improve customer service and enhance its position as an industry thought leader.

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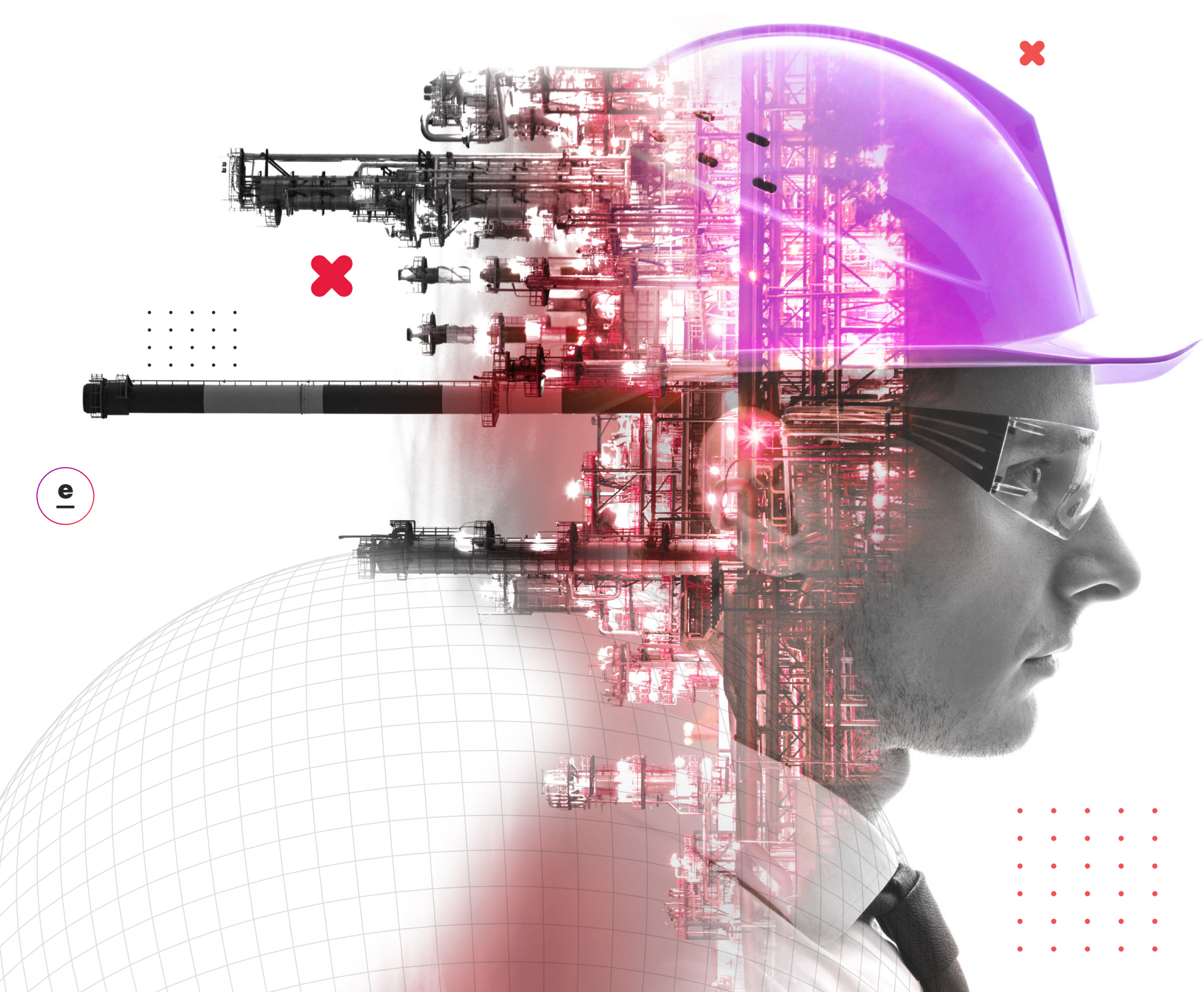
BACKGROUND

Prior to its acquisition, Western Refining was a crude oil refiner and marketer

Western Refining was established in 1997 as an oil refinery management company based in El Paso, Texas, and operated primarily in three regions domestically. Subsequent acquisitions turned it into one of the largest publicly traded independent oil refiners in the U.S. When it was acquired in 2017, it had 7,300 employees, more than 260 convenience stores/gas stations, a pipeline and storage subsidiary, and a processing capacity of 242,500 barrels of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel per day.

Western Refining is one of the largest publicly traded independent oil refiners in the U.S.



CHALLENGE

After acquiring several oil and gas companies, Western Refining needed to re-establish market leadership for its wholesale division

A spate of acquisitions by Western Refining had created confusion in the wholesale marketplace for petroleum products, and an effort to centralize customer service led customers to believe they were no longer working with a local company. To exacerbate the problem, the division had not yet clarified changes to its product distribution process. Post-acquisition employee churn was adding to the volatile environment.

Western Refining engaged Elevation Marketing to uncover operational challenges that were negatively affecting customer perception, then develop a new brand story, value proposition and messaging to differentiate the company from its competitors and strengthen its relationships.

STRATEGY

Multiphase research lays the groundwork for amplifying thought leadership and increasing customer satisfaction

PHASE 1: RESEARCH AND DISCOVERY

Elevation conducted telephone interviews with 602 new and established customers to understand their relationship with, and perception of, Western Refining. Interview questions centered on customer satisfaction and included multiple open-ended questions that enabled the customers to provide details about what they liked, what frustrated them and what they needed the company to do differently. Elevation also included 129 "lost customers" in the interview project to determine why they no longer worked with Western Refining and whether they would entertain the idea of re-engaging.

An in-depth competitive messaging audit examined how the company and 23 of its competitors were positioning themselves online and in various marketing materials easily accessible from their sites. Elevation looked at their positioning, value props, taglines and key messages to determine what the companies thought was important to tell their customers and the language they were using to do so. The goal: determining how Western Refining could differentiate itself from its competitors.

To benchmark Western Refining's positioning and thought leadership, Elevation also conducted a public relations audit of the company and 21 of its competitors over nine months. Elevation analyzed the coverage each company was receiving and how they were positioning themselves in 51 top-tier trade publications targeting six market segments: oil and lube, fleet, car dealers, food service, HVAC and mining. Six regional business publications were included as well. Elevation looked at:

- Type of coverage – news, mention, feature, contributed article, case study
- Share of voice – amount of coverage vs. competitors
- Topics of interest to publications

"We market what we make."
– Western Refining Wholesale Leadership

"Western Refining's product supply is good. The products I need are always available."
– Paul Carter, Carter Oil

"Prices were cheaper at the local stores than we were purchasing from Western Refining."
– Lost Customer

PHASE 2: RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

There's no better way to understand existing customers and detractors than to have a conversation with them and ask the questions that can drive change. And, although it's not an exact correlation, how a company presents itself and how prospective customers perceive it should go hand in hand.

On average, existing customers had been doing business with Western Refining for six years, so it was doing a lot right. Through the telephone interviews, Elevation found that customers liked doing business with the company because its reps were responsive, it was easy to place orders and those orders arrived on time. They rated the Western Refining customer support staff highly, too. There were, of course, areas that could be improved, from its short billing cycle to its customer care processes. And, they were hungry for news that could help them understand trends that would directly affect their growth and profitability. Overall, two-thirds of its customers were very likely to recommend it to others, giving them a healthy Net Promoter Score (NPS) and an opportunity to capitalize on a powerful secondary marketing channel.

"Lost customers" were more negative, as would be expected. For them, challenges with pricing, inventory, billing and customer service led them to engage with competitors. When it came to the latter, they wanted more interaction and follow-up from the company. They also would have appreciated more information on things that directly affected their business, such as pricing updates and maintenance specs. Still, a third were very likely to recommend Western Refining to others, especially when their reason for leaving was not emotional, such as needing coverage in an area the company didn't service.

The PR audit found that more than half of the stories in target publications were vendor-agnostic, with media interest honing in on industry economics, oil analysis and categories such as "selective catalytic reduction" instead. That insight was important in understanding how to build thought leadership. When the focus was on a company, Western Refining came in second to a competitor and garnered 25 percent of coverage overall.

The competitive messaging audit provided insight into how Western Refining could differentiate itself to those looking for information online—which topics were table stakes, such as innovation, and gaps that the company could capitalize on.

PHASE 3: STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

Elevation recommended several actions to help Western Refining improve customer service and enhance its position as an industry thought leader.

The telephone interviews uncovered a wealth of opportunities to move the needle on customer service, many easily addressed. First and foremost: more customer contact. Elevation proposed setting up regular calls with customers to signal that the company valued their business, to give salespeople a natural way to introduce new products, and to enable issues to be surfaced and solved quickly—before they became so problematic that the customer turned into an ex-customer. Additionally, Elevation suggested that Western Refining publish a newsletter on a monthly or bimonthly basis to keep their customers informed about industry trends, new products, and topics that mattered to them, such as synthetic lubricants, biofuels, natural gas, propane and solar oils. Not only would this address some of the customer service observations, it would increase share of mind and reinforce the company's expertise and thought leadership. Interviewees also noted some specific collateral needs, such as location maps.

Customers were split on whether or not they would order online, but enough indicated they would do so—about a third, a percentage sure to grow—that Elevation recommended that Western Refining develop online ordering capabilities to complement, and provide a convenient alternative to, placing orders with reps. Further build-out of the site would include product and service announcements, technical information, FAQs, and online access to billing statements and other account necessities.

From a PR perspective, a focus on sustainability, oil analysis and ways to react to increasing fuel prices would garner more coverage in publications preferred by target audiences. Western Refining also needed to produce more news to increase its share of voice. And, given the needs of maintenance managers, success stories would serve to position the company as a trusted thought leader.

And, to ensure Western Refining stayed on top of customer service issues and opportunities, Elevation suggested that they implement NPS best practices and carry out a customer satisfaction survey annually.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Regular Calls**
2. **Newsletters**
3. **Ordering Online**
4. **Build-out Website**
5. **Public Relations**

ABOUT ELEVATION

Full-Funnel Marketing Solutions for Today's B2B Buyers.

Elevation Marketing creates meaningful customer engagements and sustainable results through data-driven, digital-first solutions that inspire change, motivate action and deliver predictable outcomes. Whether it's brand, demand, ABM, channel or sales enablement, we are experts in connecting brands to people and performance through end-to-end B2B marketing programs. By looking at your brand through the lens of your business, we help you break through the obstacles that stand between you and greater sales, increased market share and increased revenue for maximum return on your investment.

Ready to discuss your project?

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