What Works

1. Tie yourself in with popular trends.

2. Play up to your audience. If it's technologically hip, your website should reflect that.

3. Get down in the trenches. Focus groups are crucial, but don't stop there—spend time with your target customers.

4. Tailor your message for specific groups.

5. Listen and adapt. Keep researching your market long after the campaign has launched.

The Essentials of Remaking Your Brand

Next page: The Army sends its advertising back to boot camp.
Operation Sign 'Em Up

Uncle Sam really wants you. With action-packed games, high-octane ads, and a slick website, the Army is persuading young Americans to enlist in droves.

How do you reinvent a classic American brand that's as old as the nation itself? That was the question facing the U.S. Army, whose “Be All That You Can Be” campaign was, by 1999, on its last legs. The Army had failed to meet its recruiting goals for three of the previous five years, and research found that most 18- to 24-year-olds viewed enlistment as little more than a last-ditch job for losers. Says Lt. Gen. Dennis Cavin, who's in charge of training and recruiting, “We were in a world of hurt.”

In search of a better place, the Army scrapped the campaign, dropped longtime ad agency Young & Rubicam, and shopped for new creative blood. Chicago-based Leo Burnett won the four-year, $400 million account and set out to make the Army, well, cool.

The ad folks slept in Army barracks. They ate in mess halls. They interviewed hundreds of soldiers and thousands of soldier-age civilians. Five months later, in January 2001, “An Army of One” made its debut during an episode of Friends. While the attacks of 9/11 briefly spurred interest in the military, the Army credits the ad campaign (and, of course, the weaker economy) for the resurgence in enlistment. This year the Army expects to get about 800,000 leads from qualified applicants interested in signing up—a 166 percent increase over the woeful days of 1999. Better yet, enlistees now have higher aptitude test scores and more college experience.

How'd Leo Burnett and the Army do it? They manned an all-out assault using the Web, videogames, print, Hollywood directors, and even a Hummer decked out as an all-terrain party vehicle. — THOMAS MUCHA

1 Exploit the Web

More than 90 percent of the Army's target audience is online at least once a week, so Leo Burnett decided to make the Army's website the campaign's centerpiece. It's enabled the Army to reach kids who otherwise wouldn't give a recruiter a minute of their time. "They tend to think of recruiters as car salesmen," says account director Ray DeThorne.

Goarmy.com is sleek and loud: clips of Black Hawk helicopters in action; purposeful-looking soldiers totting big guns; screaming guitar riffs. "The badass quotient is high," says senior designer Zac Rybacki. Thanks largely to ads placed on sites like MTV.com and Real.com, Goarmy.com logged more than 11 million visits last year, a 37 percent jump from 2001. The site's chat room is hosted by online recruiters. There, anonymous teens can ask questions like "Am I too fat?" It's turned out to be a huge driver. On average, 750 people chat each day. Of those, 10 percent end up enlisting.
2 Tap Into What's Hot

A professor at West Point, Col. Casey Wardynski, saw how obsessed his students were with computer games and hatched a plan to use a game as a recruiting tool. The game, available on Goarmy.com, was designed by a team of students at the Naval Postgraduate School. They spent a year training at 20 bases to ensure the game was realistic. When America's Army: Operations debuted last July 4, high demand overloaded the Army's servers. Now, roughly half a million people play each weekend. A side benefit: Many recruits already know their way around Fort Benning, Ga., when they arrive for basic training.

3 Make the Message Ring True

Research found that kids felt disconnected from the Army. So Leo Burnett set out to show that the Army is made up of real people by creating print and TV ads featuring actual soldiers in real situations. The truth has to look good, so the team hired big-name directors like Tony Scott (Top Gun, Spy Game). The result: Special Forces units scale mountains and blast through deserts. Tanks roll. Advertising on TV—stations like Comedy Central and ESPN that serve the 18-to-24-year-old demographic—has been especially successful. Ads featuring toll-free phone numbers generated 201,000 leads last year, second only to the Internet.

4 Play to Your Audience

There's a reason the Army sponsors NASCAR driver Jerry Nadeau and erects elaborate stages at every race. The largely white, working-class audience is packed with potential recruits. To reach blacks, the team designed "Taking It to the Streets," a tour of predominantly black colleges and high schools. You'll find an "Army of One" Hummer fitted with a basketball hoop and blaring hip-hop. Last year the tour generated 13,000 leads—a figure expected to double this year. To reach Latinos, Leo Burnett is customizing a Hummer H2—complete with tricked-out rims—to unveil this spring. Says Ahmad Islam, who runs the campaign's multicultural strategy: "You've got to deliver in a way that's culturally relevant."