

Understanding the meaning of branding: back to basics

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Toronto, Ontario

The Marketing Challenge (Spring/Summer 2003) Vol. 6, Iss. 2.

In the last few years I've heard numerous definitions for what branding consists of. It has been misunderstood by so many companies and as a result, they have experienced dismal results. Sadly believed by many, branding is about designing a logo, adding a new colour to an existing one or making a sign or label to identify a company or product — in other words extrinsic attributes. The term “branding” has been applied incorrectly, albeit unknowingly, in executive corporate circles, it has ended up contradicting its very meaning.

For these reasons, among a host of others, the way many understand branding and in turn their expectations of it, has not delivered. Why? Because, they weren't really engaged in branding, and the plan, as a result, was not cohesive. What they were engaged in, was the tangible or visual component of branding, or quite possibly a visual identity program.

Visual identity is an important part of the branding process but it's not entirely what branding is. What's more distressing is the fact that many start the branding process somewhat in reverse order, or somewhere in the middle. Some don't even know what they're ultimately striving for or what their plan, goals and objectives are. This is when any chance of success at branding are significantly discounted if not absolutely removed. Out of sheer “dumb luck”, some may realize positive dividends, but who wants to work this way, the risk is too high. Further, if the very meaning of branding is misunderstood, a risk, then, is not realized. In fact it's only in hindsight that a risk exists and by then it's too late.

This essay outlines the basics of branding and a few examples of good brand success stories to help others see the light.

Setting the record straight

Branding has been around in western commerce since pre-industrial times. It has evolved into a more comprehensive, strategic business model, but the basic principles remain the same. Branding, essentially, is a customer's perception of your product or service; and dealing with perception is a challenging and delicate task. It's a collection of experiences, feelings and expectations one has over a product.

A product can forever remain just that. Or, it can become something greater; something you can exploit while your customers develop a heightened need for your product - unconscious or otherwise. If your customer feels something special; an emotional connection; a need and want to have your product, well, you're now entered their mental real estate.

In the context of branding, perception is reality; it can work *for* you (brand asset) or work *against* you (brand liability). Further, branding ought to be something that represents a meaningful connection to the customer, is culturally relevant and boasts smart creative, thereby increasing the visual awareness of your brand. With these three vital components working together, good brand planning begins, and as a result, one may see a degree, if not a lot of improvement, in their business endeavor.

A sound, well-planned, focused and integrated marketing communications (IMC) plan to support your brand is germane to its success. Before promising something about your product or service, make sure your promise can be delivered. Beware of any unintended and unintentional message that may be conveyed in your communications to customers and prospects. Many marketers make this mistake. They don't evaluate or market- test their messaging or creative before going live. Conversely, if the message is relevant, timely and the promise is delivered, then you've discovered the customer's “sweet spot”, and they will love your brand and it will become part of their mental real estate. Great territory! Staying there is a different story.

This is ultimately where a product or service ultimately wants to end up. Once customers' heart and trust have been captured, they simply cannot be let down. If they are let down, depending on the severity, they may not fully forgive you. The brand may lose some loyalty and customers may or may not return. It's tough being at the bottom trying to climb up to be the top choice, but it's just as tough being at the top and staying there. Remember, routine breeds complacency; don't get caught in this trap. If a brand is to remain number one, the brand manager has to think like number two. The brand manager needs to constantly reassess the plan to ensure it is on track with customers' ever-changing wants and needs. It is a relationship that needs to be created, grown and nurtured.

Before embarking on a branding endeavor

Building a brand doesn't happen over night. The marketer needs to understand what's required in developing a brand and what is also required in maintaining it. Step back from the picture before getting caught up and excited about an idea that is not clear, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Why do you need to do this in the first place?
- What are your business objectives and what is ultimately your mission?
- Why do you need to re-brand or even create a brand? Will a product do?
- Who or what are you in your customers' minds?
- Are customers perceiving your product or service the way you want them to?
- What is your market share and is there room for growth?
- Who are your competitors?
- In what markets or sectors do your competitors serve?
- Is there a long-term need for your product - sustainability?
- What's the demography like for your product?
- Where do you want to be and by when?
- What other options do you have?
- Can your budget sustain your marketing plan? And not just one or two year's worth!
- What is your critical path?
- Do you have the right leadership and culture within your organization to undertake this challenge and embrace such a change?

A clear understanding of what your business wants reach, at the outset, and what your position is to be, is imperative. If the market has been properly assessed, and business expectations realistic, then an informed and appropriate decision can follow. To assist in succeeding with this undertaking, a culture needs to be created from top down and back up again. Further, a plan needs to be set that answers back to an already-established set of objectives.

Challenges

Internal buy-in is critical in the success of a brand. In fact, it has become an enterprise problem. It is probably the biggest hurdle encountered when engaging in a full-blown brand plan. People do not embrace change well. Newer generations will - and do - embrace the concept of change more positively. It all lies in how a business goes about introducing such an initiative: Inclusion of staff and how a brand plan is rolled out. Are staff the first to know? If the proper steps are taken and the plan (with a built-in degree of flexibility), is followed and the business is in a position that can respond to unforeseen environmental factors and challenges, and the plan is communicated to all staff with consistency, thereby creating internal ambassadors who will help maintain and grow the culture, the rate of your brand's success will be much greater.

Senior management must buy into this change in totality and lead by example. The CEO's responsibility is to be the evangelist and storyteller of the brand; unfortunately, this is a rarity. Senior management needs to instill the message organization-wide. Once this is accomplished, what would have otherwise been a

bumpy road to success, becomes a smoother one. A unified support team is required behind the brand across all points of contact with the internal customer. This is where it all starts. If you don't succeed in doing this, in all likelihood, success with your external customers will not meet expectations.

Everyone needs to be on board and take ownership of the brand they love, and show this in everything they do. Everything! Employees need to behave like owners of the company because essentially, they are! It's a cultural point, and it's a critical one. Many of these points are the "intangibles" of a brand. It makes it much easier to sell a brand when a company's owners and employees are whole-heartedly behind it.

The next step is to take it externally to your paying customers with pride and conviction. Create emissaries of the brand and educate everyone at every opportunity through effective positioning. Make sure you're prepared to sing the tune to your customers, in a cohesive manner. Using a technique called FAB (Features, Advantages, Benefits), to pitch your brand, can and is, very effective.

Passion is needed for building a brand

You need to really get to know your customers. You need to create a lasting relationship with them. There are parts to a brand that cannot be touched: such as "values". Such a characteristic is what customers will either connect with or reject. Customers need TLC (tender loving care). The only true asset that marketers can possess is that of their audiences' mind. Owners of a product or service don't really own the brand, customers do.

Customers need to be offered something they really need; something relevant and something meaningful; something that will improve their lives. These positive and rewarding experiences that are created by a product or service, make customers happy to part with their money. It's all about them. If they like it, they'll take ownership of it. *Remember, they own the brand, not the company.* This is when it becomes clear that your company has an emotional brand, one that differentiates itself from other brands. It is a brand with personality and one where customers put little or no emphasis on price due to other emotional benefits that your brand offers them. Connecting with your customers periodically, to see what their needs are and where the trend is going, and be first in line for them, is part of the game. It's a partnership.

Separating from the competition.

The world is a theatre and every company chooses its way to behave with its customers. What's your company's act and how will your brand promise be delivered every single time? If it doesn't, all that you will probably be is a transient extra in a market hungry for success and share of mind and wallet. The brand or service needs a USP, (unique selling proposition) to help it rise above the competition and into customers' pockets. There is a Darwinism about this concept in that we all want to stay fit and survive. What is it that your brand will do differently that customers will side with it? Product benefit has to be considered - what do *they* get out of it?

Here comes the "valued benefits" part: Customers are not buying Michelin tires, they're buying safety; customers aren't buying Disney tickets, they're buying fun for the whole family. What's the meaningful offer or promise of your brand? What will make your offer different? To this end, for example, a retailer needs to get customers to *plan* their trip to your store because they see it as a "destination", a purpose to get *your* product; otherwise, the business is just part of a cityscape of countless other retailers and products to which customers become desensitized. I remember an excerpt from an article I read once: "Think of it this way: The Brand is the theme park and the product is the souvenir."

Brand attitude

This refers to target audiences' evaluation of a product or service in relation to a product's perceived ability to satisfy the reason why a customer wants the product in the first place (the motivations behind it.) A customer's reason for buying a product may differ from time to time, which is why the motivations

behind customers' decisions to act or even entering the category in the first place, must be understood.

Where a product – which could become an emotional brand - lies in the minds of customers, must be known. Is the product low-involvement-informational (negative motivations), or low-involvement transformational (positive motivations)? An example of a low-involvement product could be toothpaste, since there's not a lot of thinking involved in buying this product because of its low risk and low-cost factors. Conversely, it can be a high-involvement informational (negative motivations), or high-involvement transformational (positive motivations) product such as an appliance, furniture or an automobile where the stakes are much higher and the purchase cycle is much longer than the toothpaste product. Understanding this model can assist in understanding customer purchase cycles, some reasons behind why people buy what they buy, and the motivations behind this consumer behaviour. Not getting this right, especially for higher-priced, long-purchase-cycle products, you miss the boat on customer patronage, resulting in lost sales and lost longer-term loyalty.

Customer insight - Learning about the customer.

One big and unfortunate error I see marketers frequently make is they never step back to see what customers will think about their product. We are all proud of our product inventions and excited to get them to market but if there's little or no need for your product, never mind trying to turn it into a brand, it will fail! And there's only one person to blame for that. A commitment to proper research, starting with your company's own buy-in, can cure any misunderstandings about what can go wrong, or could have gone better regarding your product's launch or brand's success.

Research, be it quantitative, qualitative, ethnographic, etc., is from gathered insight where salient data are collected and from which current and potential customers' wants and needs are understood. As a result, it ought to be at the outset that should determine what shape a plan should take, and thereafter, corporate expectations set. This is paramount to your marketing and advertising plan. The purpose of collecting such data and develop a study or survey accordingly, must be clear. A business should never lose sight of who tomorrow's customers will be. You need a visionary to know and lead this process. The position a business expects to hold in an ever-changing and competitive marketplace must follow.

Research shows that - albeit dependent on various factors - if your mother used Tide detergent, in all likelihood you will, too. Consumer behaviour and its dynamics need to be understood. Psychography is also important in helping a business understand customers' motivations. You can't just base decisions on demography alone, it's too incomplete and therefore misleading. Make sure that once your business has these data, leverage them strategically; know how to decipher it all; make sense of the information and plan from it. Otherwise it will look like a daunting pile of information that will collect dust, not to mention a waste of time and money.

Positioning. What position do you want to own in the marketplace?

Firstly, a company needs to establish itself as having something unique to offer; a Unique Selling Proposition; A Value Proposition. A business can't and shouldn't think it could be a jack of all trades and everything to all people. FedEx's primary product is to deliver packages across the world every day. Simple! And they do it well. Assess the market and from this see if there's an untapped source in terms of product positioning in a market segment or category, and go for it! Select a position that no one has taken exploited, or build on or improve something that exists, but do it in an emotional and meaningful way.

Choose words carefully. In my opinion, a word alone actually means little. Words have no meaning. It's the people who use such words in context and with expression that ultimately give meaning to them. Choose the words in your positioning statement carefully and repeat it so to ensure it sounds effective. Words need to resonate with people. Make sure they are emotive enough to attract the buyer's attention, pique their interest, create desire and ultimately provoke action (AIDA). Market positioning needs to be

accompanied by a logo or other brand imagery. The positioning promise and visuals have to work in unison, and it is this marriage of pictures and type that prospects and customers will retain. Or not! Remember, you can also *create* that “need” that customers are not even aware of, through your marketing and positioning.

When a company figures out why, what, who and where it wants to be, it needs to understand how it is going to communicate its message. What’s your claim or promise? This will lie in your positioning within the marketplace. Your company needs to advertise and promote this through an integrated marketing communications plan, to prospects and current users, consistently. Contrary to popular belief, advertising is not the last step in the process. Advertising is not an end, it’s a means. In fact, the brand is the end. It’s axiomatic in advertising that increased exposure, as well as increased impressions of your product can and does improve top-of-mind awareness; it is a cornerstone in developing customer preference which can increase your chances of becoming a stronger brand, or becoming one in the first place.

Cultural sensitivities in all marketing efforts for a business and its reseller channels, is critical. Local customizing of a brand’s marketing efforts is crucial to a brand’s success. The message needs to be meaningful to the audience. This is where segmentation should strongly be considered.

The following are some questions to ask when engaged in positioning planning:

- What is your offer or promise?
- Who is your competition and what are they doing in the branding arena?
- If you were a customer, would you use their product? Why?
- How are you going to communicate your claim and promise?
- Do you know to whom the message will be targeted?
- Is there need for segmentation to better target and enhance your results?
- Is your plan aligned with your business objectives?
- Your rollout plan: Is it a hard or soft launch or a phased-in plan?

Before launching an ad campaign...

First, do a situational analysis and from that build a plan. The strategic media objectives would have to be created as well. Look at what the current population base is and where the business wants to go from there, and how it wants to grow that segment. Look at the advertising’s and promotion’s reach and how they fit into geographic areas. Break out costs by region and by medium and by month and season, if applicable. Also include media and creative considerations and recommendations. Include an assessment of advertising reach vs. frequency, by medium. Know the business’ market by city and size and take into account regional considerations in terms of how the business would treat each different market. Always be cognizant of spillover customers who travel from one Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) border to another as in Niagara Falls, Ontario to Buffalo, New York. Track these data and capitalize on them.

Consider the tools necessary in getting your message out. Unsolicited viral marketing which may come from word of mouth or email, due to customer satisfaction or lack thereof, of course, has great reach capability over a short period; this can and does spread very quickly. Public relations, for example, along with an IMC plan, if done strategically and properly, is an effective means of communication. Starbucks and The Body Shop leveraged these media very effectively, especially during their growth years.

Timing is critical and a business needs to know what else is happening in the marketplace; what its competitors are doing and what they’re launching; and plan a strategic launch accordingly. The deliverables have to be positive. If it’s not a good customer connection or the customers’ perceptions are negative, the business needs to regroup. And fast! The media can work in both ways as can advertising and promotion. Ensure a company’s message is on target and that it can and will deliver on your promise

every single time.

Customer touch points

Ensuring all touch points with your customer are positive, from the initial phone-in call to the final smile, is vital. I mean complete, consistent and personalized customer service, whatever the point of contact is. Don't fail here!

Further, all your suppliers must be aligned with your company's brand values and they must understand what your company's "brand success model" is. They need to understand your company's culture and commitment to its customers. Whether selling direct and/or by other channels, your company needs to ensure your intermediaries understand your brand, too. In other words, in the context of selling your product, your third parties need to conduct themselves in the same manner as your employees do on a daily basis. This is "distribution" at work, which is also part of the branding mix.

Internally, an understanding and appreciation of customer satisfaction and return on investment (ROI) is crucial. Customer Relationship Management is a very focused approach to personalizing the service you offer your customers. With CRM, you can get very granular in terms of how close you want to get to your customer. If resources allow, you can even get it down to a one-on-one basis. The total buying experience including pre and post purchase, overall service, ease of doing business as well as accessibility both electronically via a corporate website or email, in person or by phone, are all part of the total brand experience. These critical points add to overall customer satisfaction and in turn could translate into loyalty. The customer's brand experience needs to be positive on all points of contact along the way, with consistency, every single time! Then you have a brand that lives and grows emotionally with people. They make it part of their life. Done any other way, would equate to just another product, swimming in a crowded sea with others, vying for share of wallet and probably competing on price alone (no longer a brand), with little or no positive customer experience to leverage.

Brand management and maintenance

Controlling and managing brand consistency is an enterprise problem. Mechanisms need to be in place to ensure adherence and consistency of brand across all customer touch points, be it print, web, broadcast, in-person, etc. A style-guide or set of corporate and brand standards for reference by internal *and* external parties can be, and is, very helpful in ensuring brand visual consistency. If resources allow, a brand warden/officer or marketing person to advise and assist in the proper use of your brand's logo and its various applications would be beneficial to the all-important brand's visual component. All employees, especially frontline people representing the brand, need to have an infectious enthusiasm and a sheer passion for their company. This is a critical zone where brand equity can be gained or lost.

A brand needs constant coddling. Something has to be created that people recognize, connect with and are willing to make it their own. Let's get with the program: branding should be looked at as an opportunity rather than a restriction. And consistency is key!

Memorable brands

Memorable brands are wanted, unique, and emotive. There are numerous brands that have captured customers' hearts, and part of it lies in keeping your brand promise and how emotional positioning is used as a strategy. For example, Michelin and Volvo connote safety and they position themselves as manufacturers of safe and reliable products. In terms of tires, apart from the fact that Michelin has a 19.6% market share on the world tire market, any tire company could have claimed or positioned themselves as "Because so much is riding on your tires," (Canadian campaign), but Michelin thought of it first and ran with it. And, they deliver on their promise!

In terms of brand equity and brand attitude, Michelin has arrived at a point where their customers feel a sense of safety and quality when they are riding on Michelins. It's this top-of-mind association that breeds a brand's success. The brand needs to be unique to reduce competition and protect itself from tactics of competitive businesses. As well, a company's USP needs to be enhanced in its communications plan as much as possible. Cause marketing is one of myriad ways many companies today use to emotionally connect with their audience, and Michelin does this, too.

Disney, another well-known brand is positioned as great entertainment for the whole family. From theme parks, restaurants and hotels, to interactive games, entertainment, retail outlets, parties and icons, and the list goes on. Disney has a plethora of options for any type of person or family to enjoy, and they deliver!

A repeat customer, needless to say, is what business is all about. Disney wants all of its customers to leave as happy as they arrived. We all know how frustrating it can be not easily being able to locate your car after a full day of fun in the sun, to the point where it can dampen your day's experience. Well, worry not! Disney wants to ensure that your memorable stay at their theme parks remain just that. They realized that some patrons were unable to locate their car. This was becoming a mounting issue so they set out to efficiently and effectively solve this problem. Disney created a system of chronology that works by one's arrival time which determines what lot you park your car. So, if you're lost in what is a massive parking lot, simply call for help from the very many conspicuously-attired Disney staff, tell them when you arrived at the park, and you'll be at your car in no time. Disney understands that the total customer brand experience needs to be positive at every stage of the way. Wow! Now that's listening to customers and immediately addressing their changing concerns or needs.

Coca-Cola, similarly, has a very deep connection with its customers, built over many generations. Coke has become more than just a drink, it's become an emotional part of many people's day. There are a lot of soft drinks in the market, but many haven't chosen Coke as their choice and made it their brand. So much so, that when Coke tried tampering with the so-called "New Coke", there was immediate protest. Needless to say, it didn't deliver to plan. It seems that Coca-Cola failed to see the emotional connection their customers had with what had become *their* \$70 billion brand. It was reverted back virtually over-night. It was an unfortunate decision. Coca-Cola had learned a costly but good lesson: insight before action. Stay in touch and always be in the know as to what drives or motivates your customers.

Starbucks is another huge global success story. They have created an ambience and style that has infused new style into this age-old beverage and all of a sudden making it the hip drink for many an age. Retail design and packaging, along with knowledgeable, upbeat, friendly, people-oriented staff, make for an overall pleasant experience. Oh, and you can sit in comfy chairs and read the paper or even do your homework. *Remember the days when we weren't allowed to do this? Same thing is happening with these large format bookstores; they want you to stay in-store for as long as possible.* What a great place to chill and relax. What a concept! What's more, they have a grand selection of pastries, dozens of varieties of coffee, tea, syrup, and this list goes on.

How did Starbucks get to where they are today? Starbucks found out how serious the Italians are about their espresso break, so in 1983 they went to Milan to observe this national custom. They quickly realized the importance to Italians of not only having a coffee but how the cafe became a social meeting place. It was, essentially, after home and work, another place for them to meet and greet, to discuss the day, the game, politics, and so on, so they sprung up all over the country and the concept imbedded itself in the Italian culture. Today, Starbucks can say the same thing. What's more, competition have taken note.

Ethnographic research: Watching people on their turf doing their thing with a given product, evidently goes a long way in terms of consumer insight. When compared to other traditional forms of research, it can be relatively inexpensive, too.

Nike, another very successful brand, doesn't have to gloat about its product but rather what it does for their customer and how it makes them feel. The "just do it" campaign had a rippling affect on many the world over. People used this phrase as inspiration to do what they've always wanted to do: fulfill their lifelong dream; get married; lose weight; all sorts of resolutions. And every time they think of what pushed them to this limit, they'll think of Nike. That's powerful! For certain products, there are intrinsic or intangible values that translate into benefits, where one's lifestyle is positively affected, and as a result, these products often become emotional and powerful brands.

However, with so much customer buy-in, oddly enough, some products can become ubiquitous to a point where they actually backfire. Let's use Nike shoes as an example: Picture having many age groups, including the elderly, wearing Nike shoes. Think about how this would make the tween and teen generations feel. They don't want to be seen wearing the same thing their parents or grandparents are wearing; it's just the way they think. As a result, they may stop using that particular Nike product or maybe even the entire brand because of negative association with a cohort the younger want to separate from.

Apple Computer with its Macintosh brand has revolutionized the way computers look in every sense. Aesthetically, they've sort of done to their computers, what Swatch did to their watches. Who said a computer had to be beige *and* perform beige, too? By the way, have you ever seen a computer prop on a TV show or big screen movie that wasn't an Apple? The Apple icon is widely recognized. With the introduction of the iPod, and who knows what else they're working on, over time, Apple will most likely further induce market shift their way, as a result of its continued uniqueness and paradigm-shifting innovation.

For other brands the connection can be so strong that they proudly create a cult or club to symbolize unity and loyalty. Harley Davidson is a good example that comes to mind: The Harley Davidson buyer is typically over fifty, wealthy, many are executives, and they treat buying such an expensive bike not for transportation but for recreation. The Harley, no doubt, became an American icon, but it has exploded into the international arena, as a symbol of free-spiritedness and sheer love for the open road.

BMW created a brand experience and promise to be reckoned with. And they deliver. BMW's positioning: "The Ultimate Driving Experience," and for many a believer. How your product makes your customer feel is vital. This is a great example of establishing an emotional connection with your customer. BMW has become synonymous with luxury, success and youthfulness. Again, it's about your customer and you need to align yourself with their wants and needs on an ongoing basis.

On the flip side, there are many brand stories that have unfortunately gone awry. Some of those brands are multinational, in various sectors, with billion-dollar budgets. That said, large companies with billion-dollar budgets, with top-notch, highly educated leaders evidently are not immune to failure.

In sum, do your research, accurately assess, plan accordingly, and take it to market. And always hit a home run with your customer! What you may get in return apart from earning a living, is the greatest satisfaction in knowing you have positively affected someone's life, and they are showing you by sheer loyalty and ongoing patronage. A pretty simple yet complex exchange, eh?