



Focus on Branding

To face this highly competitive marketplace with limited and, perhaps shrinking, resources, we must be sure that our marketing dollars are spent wisely. That means a focus on the fundamentals. A company's ability to achieve its mission and meet revenue targets is highly related to the strength of its brand. We're reminded time and again how strong brands have navigated successfully through the ups and downs of the economy – Apple, Coke, Disney, FedEx, Hertz, J.D. Power and Associates, McDonald's, Tide, etc.

But what does it mean to be a “strong brand”? It means that wherever a consumer – customer or prospect – or employee or investor goes, they experience your brand in the same way. In all of its arenas and among all of its constituencies, your brand should have the same “look and feel”, the same image and should communicate the same core messages. And, that image and those messages must be consistent with a desirable and deliverable brand promise.

Branding is the key to differentiating a product or service. It is the buyer's connection to a brand and will profoundly influence whether you make the sale – or it goes to a competitor.

Conduct a Brand Audit

Now is a good time – in fact, it is now imperative - to audit your marketing and communications tools to assess their effectiveness in promoting a cohesive message for your brand.

- Logo and tag line – do they appear in the same design, colors and font throughout your organization? Are they still relevant to the mission and value proposition of your company?
- Stationary system – do all of the company's divisions and offices have the same design and copy format? Are they consistent with your desired brand image?
- Signage – do all offices and storefronts sport the same artwork indicating that there's a professional, well integrated operation? Are the design characteristics consistent with your desired brand image?
- Titles – are the job titles uniform across the company? Do they reflect your value to the customer, i.e. barista, cast member, customer service advocate?
- Sales – do all of your reps provide the same information and sense of the company's products and approach? Is there uniformity among presentation and sales materials? Do customers and prospects understand what differentiates you?
- Customer service – do your greeting and problem solving approach reflect your desired market position?
- Media relations – is your press kit consistent with the look and content of your other marketing materials? Does it communicate your unique brand? Are your spokespeople presenting the brand promise beyond functional product descriptions?
- Investor relations – do your investors understand the identity the company is portraying? Is that identity communicated in all investor materials? Is the identity communicated to investors consistent with your desired brand image in the marketplace?

Facts to Paint a Picture™

Why Pay Attention to Your Brand?

- Differentiate your brand in a crowded marketplace.
- Build customer loyalty by setting consistent expectations and delivering on promises.
- A well-established brand gives customers confidence in the value of a product and company.
- Give employees a sense of pride and confidence.
- 65% of investors consider branding among the top three factors when making an investment decision (NIRI, 2001).
- Investors understand what the company stands for and see a stable, durable business.

Market Research is Key

It is essential to obtain feedback about how the brand is seen - versus its competition and desired attributes for the category - and to determine whether the materials representing the brand communicate attributes supporting the brand strategy and differentiate the brand in the marketplace.

The first step is to determine the equities in existing marketing tools, e.g. brand name, logo, tag line. It is critical to know what their elements are saying about the brand so that you retain those making a positive contribution and discard those making a negative or irrelevant contribution. Qualitative interviews exploring these dimensions conducted by an objective, skilled researcher can uncover the full range of attitudes that exist among all of the brand's audiences.

The results of the first step determine changes needed in current marketing tools. Alternative design solutions are explored in a second series of qualitative interviews to be sure that they communicate the intended messages and determine which solutions best support the brand strategy.

The final choice between solutions should be based upon a quantitative survey in which each alternative is evaluated against the attributes that reflect the brand's strategy and communication goals. Online surveys provide an inexpensive means of obtaining actionable data.