

Good Branding

With all the books, classes, seminars, newsletters, web casts and articles being offered on branding you might expect the level of branding to be so sophisticated and developed that all the branding gurus would be starting to reconsider what other aspect of marketing now needs their magical touch. Sadly, the good news for the gurus (that their lessons have yet to be learned) is bad news for most businesses. Branding is in a dismal state. In most cases companies wouldn't know branding if it came up to them and kissed them on their logo.

Surely marketing in general is in crisis and the poor level of branding is just a reflection of the overall state of the discipline. Marketers have descended into a path of tricky and deception because they no longer want to work hard to build reputation and loyalty. The need for immediate results and the abandonment of core marketing principles by top corporate executives has led to a deterioration of the notion that a company, in order to sustain long term growth, needs to stand for something and to "own" an idea in the hearts and minds of consumers. This central branding concept, which drove the entire marketing strategy of a company, has been abandoned for quick sales tactics like fluctuating pricing models, mail-in rebates, and limited stock limited time only offers. Consumers, while having little choice (because there are no alternatives) resent the treatment and have responded by abandoning the concept of brand loyalty. In a cyclical logic, marketers then point to the lack of brand loyalty as a reason they are reducing their branding efforts.

Coming up through the marketing ranks in this new environment, where branding is given lip service but no implementation priority, many new marketing executives simply lack the understanding of what branding really is and how branding can be transformed from a theoretical concept into a living, breathing idea that connects products to consumers in a way that is genuine and meaningful to them. And even though there are literally tens of articles, newsletters, books, seminars, and web casts that talk about branding, most of them either start at a level that is too sophisticated or are themselves pop marketing exercises seeking to make a buck by trying to combine the inclination for immediate return with a respectful nod toward branding.

Recognizing the tremendous need Tudog offers, in this article, the 5 core fundamentals of branding. But before the list begins, let us clarify that branding is not, under any circumstances, an immediate return marketing strategy. Branding is, by definition, a long term strategy for which resources are invested today and the benefit is realized sometime tomorrow. The good thing about branding however is that the return is sustainable, as long as the investment in nurturing the brand continues.

The Tudog core branding fundamentals are:

1. There Must Be a Claim

The central idea behind branding is that the brand stands for something. Typically this "something" is a statement of quality, purpose, convenience, value, or prestige.

2. The Claim Must Be Distinctive

Whatever the claim is, it should be distinctive in the marketplace, meaning that the “mind and heart space” the brand is targeting is not already occupied by a different brand in the same sector.

3. The Claim Must Be Meaningful

It is one thing to make a claim in the marketplace that is distinctive and quite another to make a *meaningful* claim that is distinctive. The difference is in the work (and time and money) it takes to determine what is truly meaningful to the target market and which message it is most likely to develop a relationship with. If your brand claim is meaningful it will become important to your customers, making your brand important. This is the essence of branding and the key to a loyal (sustainable) customer base. As a side notion to this point, branding is as much an emotional interaction as it is a practical one (perhaps even more emotional than practical). In order for the emotion to be successful the branding has to be memorable and genuine. There is nothing worse than the backlash of emotions betrayed.

4. The Claim Must Be Believable

It is not enough to make a claim that touches a cord in the hearts and minds of your targeted customers. You must also find a claim that can be believed – mostly because it is true. The claim you make must accurately reflect the benefit the product delivers. Claims of quality must be backed up by a quality product, just as claims of value must be truly reflected in the cost-quality relationship of the product. The entire branding experience can be destroyed by claims that are untrue, exaggerated, or aren't substantiated by the consumer experience. Misleading or untrue claims will have a devastatingly negative effect on branding efforts, and if the inclination is toward less than honest branding, chances are the better choice is no branding at all.

5. The Claim Must Be Demonstrated

The claim will only resonate with customers if it can be demonstrated in the product. The idea that a brand stands for youth or a certain attitude is worthy only if the product or service is youthful or consistent with the respective attitude. Your customers will be able to tell if you're forcing an image or trying too hard, and they will not reward the effort, they will punish the lack of honesty.

In conclusion, good branding is all about being true – true to your customers, true to your product, and true to your branding effort. In a time when marketing is all about confusing the customer, misleading the customer, or ignoring the customer, a genuine attempt at good branding would most likely not only be welcomed by customers – it would be celebrated.