

## Standout Branding

The topic of branding is revisited in these pages often because it is a very essential component of excellent marketing, and one which, unfortunately, is either misunderstood or underrated to the point of being relegated to minor importance. In studies most business executives recognize that branding is a critical function of the company's marketing and a key means of developing and sustaining a strong connection to the consumer bases upon which the company depends for its survival and prosperity. Despite this acknowledgement, however, few of these same executives devote the time, financial resources, or expertise to their branding, leaving it suffering from lack of attention and insufficient exposure (or worse, the wrong exposure).

Making the challenge even more difficult is the clutter of all the advertising, direct mail, public relations, billboards, etc. that compete for consumer attention, leading marketers to erroneously conclude that the only way to get noticed is to do anything and everything to catch someone's eye. The fact that these desperate tactics do little to create and maintain an image is not relevant. Companies have abandoned long term market development for the immediate gratification of instant sales. To achieve this they are willing to sacrifice their brand because they do not know how to get their brand to stand out. This article shows the way.

Standout Branding is all about creating a sustainable relationship with your customers by creating and maintaining an image that means something to the people you want buying whatever it is you are selling. A standout branding process is comprised of 5 components. They are:

1. The Product
2. Awareness Campaign
3. The Overall Product Appearance
4. The Offer
5. The Channels

Let's look at each in more depth:

1. The Product – the product being sold needs to have the personality and characteristics of the image the brand is seeking to create. For example, Apple products have an image of innovation and the products are designed to support this image. Simple tasks, such as the song selection mechanisms on the iPod, are approached from a perspective of being innovative, resulting in a distinctive way to perform the function, plus a “cool” looking device. Apple is an excellent example of a company that creates products that support its brand image.

2. Awareness Campaign – it is in the awareness campaign that the dilemma of striving for immediate sales volume as opposed to cultivating a long term image comes into play. The corporate executives – many of whom have no appreciation for branding – typically press for immediate results as they are under pressure from shareholders and investors to deliver strong quarterly results. Conversely, die-hard marketers and business leaders with vision know to stress the development of long term customer relationships. The awareness campaign is the company's opportunity to connect with customers and instill in their hearts and minds the associations the company seeks to project. The manner

with which the awareness is raised (the tactics used) speak to consumers and set the stage for the company's image. Clearly raising awareness is critical if the market is to gain interest in a company and the products it sells. The branding issue requires that the company decide what is truly important and what does it really need the consumer to be aware of?

3. Overall Product Appearance – everything about the product reinforces its image. The color of the product, the packaging, the structure and access to functions all combine to constitute the overall appearance. The development of a product's appearance without forethought into its brand image is a fatal disconnect in the company marketing process and could cost a company its position in the marketplace. There must be a consistency between what the company intends to communicate and how the product appears. This consistency serves to reinforce the company's message, but, more importantly, in the minds of consumers, it serves to validate the message. If the company claims to be cutting edge and appears to be so, then the consumer is willing to accept the image. Conversely, if the company claims to be state of the art, but appears to be low grade, consumers will reject the desired company image as just so much marketing yadda-yadda.

4. The Offer – the offer is where you communicate your worth to the market. The core point of the offer is to propose to the marketplace the product or service you are willing to provide and the cost you are demanding in exchange. If consumers view your offer as reasonable (or advantageous to them) they will respond by buying your product or service. The way you instill a perception of your worth, however, is where the standout branding comes in. If you wish to position your product as exclusive or high end, you will need to prepare the market for the corresponding premium price. If the market does not accept the image of your product or company as exclusive you will not be able to demand a premium. Therefore the connection between the brand and the offer is essential and needs to be approached in a calculated and planned manner.

5. The Channels – another standout branding element is the channel through which you distribute your product. Once again, the pressure for immediate sales often leads companies to seek out broad distribution, thereby compromising the integrity of their brand. The place where your product can be purchased needs to be consistent with the image you are presenting to the market and the offer you are promoting. Anything short of this consistency will either confuse the market or dilute the brand.

Standout branding is not as complex as it seems. A strong commitment to the brand and a willingness to execute core marketing fundamentals are all that are needed. The dismal state of branding (and marketing in general) does not come from a lack of understanding of what it takes to market well, it comes from a lack of dedication and a short term view of business. While the short view may be making the cash register ring, it is not earning lifetime customers that will serve to drive growth for a brand that is well crafted and actually means something to its customers. This is what every company should strive for because it is good for business.