

Nine Ways to Fix a Broken Brand

The marketing excesses of the past few years left broken pieces scattered across the branding landscape. As a result, many companies are left with bogged-down, boring -- even dying and dead -- brands. Now take a look at your brand: Do you know what's broken? Do you know how to fix it?

From: Issue 55 | February 2002 | Page 72 **By: Scott Bedbury** **Photographs by: Fredrik Broden**

In the past few years, everyone has tried to jump on the brand wagon. Creating buzz, being cool, breaking through the static, embracing viral marketing -- you name it, everyone's tried it. The late, lamented dotcoms most recently led the charge, inspired by the notion that throwing endless amounts of money at the customer would build a great brand -- even if there wasn't a relevant product or service behind the campaign. Never in the history of marketing have so many companies spent so much for so little. This branding eruption has left in its wake more than a few broken, bent, or badly confused brands. Here are nine of the most common complaints about brands that are in need of fixes -- and some practical approaches to applying brand aid.

1. I know that my brand is broken -- I just don't know why.

Brands get sick, lost, or broken for many reasons. Before you know it, everything that you thought was crystal clear about your brand positioning becomes murky and impenetrable. Too often, when companies realize what has happened to their brand, they blindly jump into action. They fire the ad agency or the chief marketing officer. They hold a boardroom retreat and look to the CEO for divine inspiration. Some argue to spend more, others to spend less. Everybody has an opinion. The problem is, every opinion is just that: an opinion.

If you're not sure why your brand is broken, the place to begin is with an almost anthropological approach to understanding the brand -- something that I liken to a "big dig." Revisit where your brand started out. What did the brand stand for originally? Why did it resonate with customers in the first place? What were its core values? Are they still present? Just as important, are they still relevant? The world changes. You need to be sure. Probe consumers about the product category that you're in. How do they feel about your competitors? What does your product or service provide them with? What are the tangible benefits, and, perhaps more important, what are the emotional benefits? Think of this as a brand audit, and don't bring your personal prejudices to the table. Listen and learn.

2. My brand changes direction with each new product and marketing campaign. Everything is disconnected and off on different tangents. How do I keep it cohesive?

One solution: Think like Plato. You may not think of the great Greek philosopher as a brilliant marketer, but he understood a fundamental principle that lies at the heart of a great brand: the concept of essence. Plato believed that deep within everything concrete is the idea of that thing. Plato, in other words, was the first to articulate the importance of a brand's essence. Nike's essence, for instance, is authentic athletic performance. When everyone in the organization understands what those words mean, staffers can unleash innovation in every quarter -- from advertising to product design to promotions -- and it all connects to something larger and more enduring.

3. My brand is boring. It doesn't create excitement in my customers or in my employees. (And it's been a long time since it excited anyone on Wall Street.)

Maybe you just need a little therapy. Abraham Maslow, a founder of humanistic psychology, is not often mentioned among the ranks of history's top marketers. But embedded in Maslow's idea of human motivation -- his "hierarchy of human needs," which places complex needs at the top, above the basics of survival -- is a key to the future of any brand. Because of the clutter of offerings in the marketplace, brands need more than customer awareness or surface-level connection. Brands need to connect on a deeper psychological level. They need to respect and acknowledge the customer's emotions -- feelings such as the yearning to belong, the need to feel connected, the hope to transcend, and the desire to experience joy and fulfillment.

Smart companies recognize that great products and services can deliver more than profits; they deliver experiences that make life better in some small way. That was the insight at the heart of the Starbucks brand expression. When we did the big dig for Starbucks, we unearthed the role that coffee has played in society for more than 500 years. We found that coffee isn't really a drink -- it's an experience that has been a part of our culture for centuries. Starbucks was less about engineering a great cup of coffee than it was about providing a great coffee experience. We went a little further up Maslow's pyramid and found ourselves thinking well outside the cup.

4. My brand is dead.

Okay, it happens. You ignore your brand for too long, or simply let it ride for too long, and at some point, it just expires. It loses all of its energy, its power to capture your customers' -- or even your -- imagination.

The good news is that even a dead brand can be revived or completely reinvented. Think of Banana Republic. It started out as a clothing retailer with a gimmick: Wouldn't it be fun to buy safari clothing and shop in a store that has fake palm trees, shipping crates for props, and a piece or two of a Jeep? Well, maybe for a while. But the half-life of even the best, most narrowly defined concept is painfully brief, and that version of Banana Republic soon enough became an endangered species. But still, there was something there, something within the notion of "business casual" that had potential for resuscitation. The Gap acquired Banana Republic and reinvented it, this time as a more upscale retailer offering everything from essential sweaters to aromatherapy products to

knockoff Donna Karan crepe suits. Quite a leap; quite a rebirth. (Of course, in time, it will need to be reinvented again.)

5. My brand is stuck in the past.

It happens to the best brands. In fact, it almost always happens to the best brands. They take off like a comet, only to plateau. They make gradual improvements, but they need transformation.

It happened to Nike. When I joined the company in 1987, it was attempting to transcend its narrow base of hard-core competitive male athletes and appeal to a broader consuming public. Up until that time, "brand Nike" was essentially pure competition: Its brand DNA was testosterone heavy, with a "wimps need not apply" ethos. "Authentic athletic performance" was being interpreted too narrowly. Nike needed to be a more inclusive, rather than exclusive, brand. At the same time, it couldn't jeopardize the young-male franchise that considered Nike to be "their" brand.

A few months before I came on board, Nike had aired a TV commercial called "Revolution" that was a huge departure for the company. It featured a complex juxtaposition of gritty black-and-white 8-mm images that ranged all over the cultural map. The message: Nike was a brand that spoke to women as well as to men, to the old as well as to the young, to obscure street athletes as well as to world champs.

The problem was, the subsequent campaign was a step in the wrong direction. "Hayward Field" -- a loving visual testimonial to the track at the University of Oregon -- was both inward and backward looking. We killed the ad minutes after previewing it to a thousand Nike sales reps who then left the sales meeting with nothing to show the footwear buyers when writing back-to-school orders. We were in a very tough spot. We sent Wieden+Kennedy back to the well with a short brief that stated the obvious: We had to stop talking just to ourselves and open up the access point to the brand. The emotional and physical benefits to sports and fitness were much more expansive than we had defined them to date.

Two weeks later, Dan Wieden, David Kennedy, and four or five staffers (who made up half of the agency at the time) had the answer. Consumers already knew all that they needed to know about fitness. Most were not happy about the shape they were in. Few had the time to be serious athletes. So why rub their noses in it? They just needed a little encouragement, an optimistic challenge. "Just Do It" was a watershed moment for Nike. It established a broad communication platform from which we could talk to just about anyone. It wasn't only about world-class athletics; it was about fundamental human values shared by triathletes and mall walkers alike. It wasn't a product statement either. It was a brand ethos. Nike had found a way to respect its past while embracing its future. "Just Do It" was a much-needed reexpression of timeless Nike values.

6. My brand is too narrow.

Here are five smart ways to build intelligent bandwidth.

First, develop a beneficial cobranding deal with a good partner -- someone who brings something of value to the table that you don't have. Starbucks's deal with United Airlines put Starbucks coffee on United flights worldwide and allowed both sides to achieve important brand objectives.

Second, reach out for a brand extension. *Time* magazine had a very popular section in the back of the book that featured interesting people. A brand extension turned that section into *People* magazine. *People* magazine was a dazzling success -- so much so that it launched its own brand extension: *Teen People* magazine.

Third, leap into new distribution channels. Putting Starbucks on United flights cobranding the cup of coffee. Putting whole-bean and ground coffees into more than 30,000 grocery stores created a complementary channel for an existing product.

Fourth, jump into new product categories. Think about Ralph Lauren's line of paints, which are now sold in home-improvement stores. The company unearthed a new category and a new distribution channel. Martha Stewart started with a cookbook. Today, if I need garden clogs, I'll buy them from her. Starbucks became the maker of the best-selling coffee ice cream in grocery stores around the nation in less than six months.

Fifth, create a new subbrand. Nike is a big brand -- but Air Jordan is a tremendously successful subbrand. Toyota is a big brand -- but Lexus is such a successful subbrand that most car buyers don't even think of it as the child of a parent company (which may be the best compliment you can pay any subbrand).

7. My brand is immature.

The Internet bubble was on the verge of bursting when I found myself speaking before a gathering of high-flying Silicon Valley techies. Flush with stock options and thrilled with their startups, they wanted to know how to make their brand-new brands into overnight hits. My advice to them: Think like a parent. Raising a great brand is like raising a great kid. And that means you need to be patient. (It wasn't what they wanted to hear.)

Great brands take steady guidance, a long view, and uncompromising values. Brands, like children, absorb the qualities of those who nurture them. Like children, brands thrive in an inspiring, caring, learning environment where they are respected, protected, and understood. When raising a brand, be consistent and committed. The shuffling of brand responsibilities and the management churn within organizations can easily produce a troubled brand. It takes time for a brand to develop its own values and personality. Good brand stewards, like good parents, build values into their brands that help them grow and endure. Great brands outlive their creators -- just like kids. And if you do your job right, they can make you proud.

8. My brand has been reduced to a commodity.

If you ignore it long enough, you can take a perfectly vital brand and reduce it to a commodity. Think coffee before there was a Starbucks. Sure, there were big coffee sellers back then. But instead of delivering a great coffee experience, those sellers delivered whatever was needed to keep the grocery chains happy. They cut costs wherever they could and stacked their products high at the ends of grocery aisles -- walls of green and red tin that reduced a once-great product to a commodity.

If that's what has happened to your product, then here's what you don't do: Don't throw money at the problem. If the dotcom era taught us anything, it's that brand awareness isn't the same as brand strength. Even the best advertising can't create something that isn't there.

My advice is first to set your sights high. Great brand builders don't just reinvent the product, they see themselves as protagonists for an entire category. That's what Nike did with sneakers, Starbucks did with coffee, and Southwest Airlines did with flying.

Second, elevate your product. If you want to be more than a commodity, offer a unique product that is unique and so much better than the rest of the field that it can't be considered a commodity. Is Krispy Kreme just a doughnut? Third, offer more than the product. Create an experience around it and pay attention to the details. Everything matters.

And fourth, remember that the company is the brand. Customers are looking through the product to your values and how you do business. Today, the difference between similar products may be corporate reputation.

9. My brand isn't cool.

"Cool" and "edge" are dangerous words. Dan Wieden is right when he tells clients who want "edgy" work that having edge means that someone gets cut. Contrary to what some people may think, Nike does not set out to be cool. It knows that cool is defined by its customers -- not by some people in Beaverton, Oregon. Be careful not to worship cool. It's a false god.

Given where the world is going, I recommend that companies be more concerned with their karma than with being cool. As a society, our concerns about the effects that globalization has on cultures and the environment will only intensify, and the bar for corporate behavior will rise. I expect that we'll look to our most trusted brands, big and small, to help reduce the enormous gap that exists between profits and benevolence.

It's a new brand world out there. We are just starting to see the issues and opportunities associated with brand karma. However it evolves, I do know that strong karma will develop after years of doing the right thing: being honest and principled and being respectful of customers, employees, and the environment. Brands like Nike and Starbucks took lightning bolts early on because they were highly visible, global, and influential -- and because they care. These companies aren't perfect, but I'm confident that they will

help write a much-needed new chapter on brand management. They will prove that big doesn't have to be bad, that profits are only one measure of success, and that great brands can use their unique superhuman powers for good.

Now that would be cool.