

What's Your Brand's Job?

Business is turbulent -- just the time to give your corporate brand a thorough checkup

April 24, 2006 By Allen Adamson

To call for a discussion of corporate branding at this point in our beleaguered economic times is to invite derision. I know that. I'm ready.

All I ask is a moment to state my premise: that there has probably never been a more apt time to discuss corporate branding than right now -- while we are rocked by distrust and disgusted by, at best immune to, the latest roil in the business pages. Not laughing all the way to the bank.

Those responsible for the corporate brand had better be doing some hard and heavy thinking about its role and promise, and, most of all, about how their brand is actually playing in Peoria. And for everyone who questions where the ultimate responsibility for brand management resides, it's not within the marketing department. The brand is the essence of a company, and should be managed from the top down.

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It might be that the first and most important task right now is to assess the role of your brand and clarify its mission. Our research indicates corporate brands can have one of two roles: They stand either for "authority" or for "assurance."

As an "authority," the company and its brand are the first and last word when it comes to product-specific differentiation -- known to be better than or different from anyone else when it comes to a certain product category. Apple Computer is known for design, Mercedes for engineering, FedEx for overnight delivery and Kodak for photographic expertise.

Authority brands hold a performance-related leadership position in the consumer's mind. A company and its brand may have got to this position by actually being first in the category, or through smart strategy and execution. Either way, they're seen as the authority on the subject.

An assurance brand is established more subjectively, with a reputation gradually gained through consumers' faith and confidence that they can rely on it. Assurance brands, quite literally, provide an assurance of quality and reliability. That is, there is someone or something stable and trustworthy standing behind the product or service. Think GE, Met Life, Michelin. It is leadership based more on faith than on any specific point of product differentiation.

Maintaining Authority

Authority brands, dealing in the realm of the rational, standing behind a tangible proof of promise fulfillment, should be a lot easier to manage in today's ephemeral marketplace. Their characteristics and attributes are tangible. They've gained authority status through a tradition of performance. Cleans deeper. Delivers faster. Lasts longer.

Give customers ongoing confirmation of the brand's value to their lives -- and keep your nose out of the dirt -- and you've got a good chance of maintaining your authority on the subject at hand. Concentrate on continued R&D investment, customer satisfaction activities (with actionable response and follow-up), product guarantees, innovative promotions and advertising messages that apolitically support the brand's promise, believable relevant PR and corporate policy. Managing an "assurance brand," unfortunately, is quite a bit more difficult. It deals in emotion and trust, for which "weakest link" is an under-statement. Brands knighted with high regard, based on a covenant of reciprocal trust with the customer, have got to pay close heed to every single message they're putting into the marketplace, every experience they represent. They have to manage every single customer point of touch with unmatched vigor in order to reinforce the promises and values that got them where they are. The one thing consumers are counting on with assurance brands is, well, assurance. They count on these brands to behave in a manner consistent with past behavior. While trust might have been slow and measured in the building, its undoing can be swift and painful.

Assurance brands need to focus in every respect on genuine customer relationship management because they do deal more in experience, not just words. They need to put greater emphasis on service reinforcement, and see that internal policies and procedures stand up to close scrutiny within the context of stated company values. They need to take on activities that confirm to the perception that ethics and character still matter. Assurance, despite its emotional genesis, is not soft. We have found that a brand that can honestly demonstrate trust not betrayed is going to be in a much stronger position going forward.

The Key: Promise Keeping

A brand is a promised benefit delivered. Authority-driven or assurance-driven is not the question. The question -- and answer -- is protecting your place in the consumer's mind by keeping your promise.

Anyone and everyone responsible for maintaining a corporate brand must remember that consumers are fickle. Loyalty must be earned. And trust is mercurial. Examine your brand. Think about what it represents to the customer, and to your own employees. Then manage it accordingly.

Whether a brand represents authority or assurance, your task is to keep its promise through appropriate behavior in every sense of the word. If you do, chances are

consumers might just keep the faith. And you'll be able to navigate your corporate brand through whatever conditions come your way.

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