

Brands & Strategies

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Whose Brand Is It, Anyway?

By Richard D'Amico

Mention branding and you open the floodgates to an onslaught of marketing babble. Like most issues, the concept of branding is multifaceted. There's the symbology of a brand—those communication devices that uniquely identify a product or service to customers and prospects that belong to the brand holder. The brand-holder also owns the brand asset, the brand equity and all the trappings of the brand; the packaging, price, positioning, advertising and public relations, which all reinforce the brand's standing in the mind of the consumer. But symbols do not dictate the brand any more than your name dictates your persona.

What is the key to a brand—what is central to the brand; and whose brand is it anyway?

Brands live in the relationship between customers and the products or services being offered. It's the customer who defines the core values of any brand—their perception is the brand's reality.

Everything a company does contributes to how its brand's image is perceived and understood by the customer. That new formulation that makes a product just a little better tasting, the rude customer service rep, the higher quality finish, the cheesy looking box, etc., all work to create the brand's identity.

The identity should be a corporate asset, not a liability that a company has to spend a fortune to correct. Yet, when you ask the brand owner to define his brand, he doesn't know unless he's asked the people who actually define it—their customers.

According to marketing author Tig Tillinghast... “marketers trying to sum up their brand's essence frequently fall victim to the temptation [to define] the brand essence as what they want it to be, rather than

what it actually is among customers. This may make for nice PowerPoint presentations to bosses, but it does little good for ongoing marketing.”

You could go to the market and ask your customers to define your brand. Simple enough you might say, but here is where we encounter one of the great pitfalls to successful marketing; "I don't need research, I know my customers."

You're probably right-you do know your customers. You can recite their demographics, income, number of kids, media habits, frequency of usage and alternate brand considerations. But unless you've talked to them, you don't really know how and why they connect with your brand above all others.

There are scores of research techniques used to identify the specific core attributes of a brand. And the costs associated with executing quality research in this area can be formidable, so much in fact that the marketer is often tempted to say-"I know my customers."

Identify Core Values

To keep things simple, one can start by identifying the core values that define the brand in the minds of its customers; those core elements that most people perceive the brand to possess, and define their emotional connection to that brand while separating it from its main competitors.

Limiting your approach places some manageable constraints on the scope of the research required and keeps project costs under control. Depending on the type of product or service, market geography and the size of customer base, you can use focus groups or one-on-one interviews to do the job; sometimes it may take more. It may even require a combination of focus groups or one-on-one interviews to set up specific brand premises and potential brand associations, followed by a series of in-depth interviews to identify the core brand values.

Communicate the Brand's Strengths

Regardless of the specific techniques used to arrive at the essence of your brand, once it is defined, the job of communicating the strengths of the brand can begin. We know who owns the brand (at least the brand assets), and understand who actually defines the brand, so now it's time to communicate the brand to its potential markets.

- **Build an external brand communications strategy** that helps to imprint the advantages of your brand on the minds of your customers by building the case for your product.

- **Identify the key customer benefit** and develop a brand positioning that clearly differentiates your product from that of your competitors.

You will then be able to use your brand's assets with the confidence that comes with understanding why your customers are your customers. But, be sure to align all the factors employed in defining and communicating your brand or you will simply establish confusion in the minds of the target.

Finally, be your brand-the entire branding effort is little more than an exercise if you don't convince your entire company that they are part of the brand and need to become ambassadors of that brand.

While this is a very simplified look at brands and how they are defined, it's a start in the direction of using your brand to grow your business. What will your customers think?

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