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The Art of Successful Branding

By Dina Giolitto

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Branding: it's a term that carries great weight in the world of advertising. Successful branding is best illustrated by the world's most prominent corporations, but it's no less important to the small business owner. Your Brand is your identity; it's every single puzzle piece, fitted into the big picture of your company. From your name and logo to your business philosophy and corporate mission; from your advertising campaign message to your design elements; from your products and services; all that is owned, produced, stated, sold and marketed by your company falls under the broad heading of your Brand.

What exactly is a "brand?" The term probably originated at a time when ours was a strictly agricultural society. Ranchers take a branding iron to their cattle, as a way to signify they OWN those cows. Likewise, modern corporations choose a logo to brand their name into the mind of the consumer. Every time you label an ad or website with your company logo; every time you take a political stance on behalf of your corporation, you're putting your brand into effect. And if a brand indicates ownership, then it should be your ultimate mission to dominate, or own, your niche. Brand your company. Own the cow.

How do you determine your style of branding? Analyze your audience. Zero in on the group you're trying to reach. Are they male, female, or both? What's the age group and economical level? What are their spending habits, their values? How do they TALK? What are they concerned about? What do they think they NEED? Where will their focus be in six months? And most importantly, how does your marketable product fit into the scheme? If you never really get to know your audience, you can read all the marketing how-to strategies in the world, and it isn't going to mean diddly-squat for your business. It isn't going to help you build your brand.

What's the next step? Always, always, always put yourself in their shoes. Jump right into their heads, if you can. Think of your audience during the business-plan conception process. How do they communicate? What do they find visually appealing? Are you marketing to senior citizens? Use bigger fonts, a nostalgic tone, and a morally forthright attitude. Is it the filthy, stinking rich whom you're trying to attract? Save the Crazy Eddie shtick, because money is no object here. Every bit of energy used to

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promote your brand should be focused toward winning over your key customer.

There will be a time when you completely lose sight of who you're trying to attract. This, in turn, dilutes the power of your brand. You'll be in the middle of writing an ad, when suddenly your head is racing with potential buyer types. This happened to me once during my writing stint with a digital media company who sold Santa Claus greetings. In my sales letter, which went on for pages and pages, there was no limit to what Santa could do! He could praise tiny tots for using the potty. He could play matchmaker to a couple of young lovers. He could patch up an argument you had with Aunt Freida in Topeka. All of this was great, but it was really convoluting Who We Were as a company, and our Santa was becoming a Jack Frost of all trades. It was no good! So we went back to square one. And through simple words and a more narrow focus on our original audience of children, we finally captured the Magic of Christmas that we had originally intended to be Our Brand.

Reflect your brand in everything you do; from your website design, to your public relations, to how you go about selling your product. Once you've done this, the next step is to create Brand Awareness. This is achieved through consistency. You can dream up the most brilliant ad campaign on the planet, but if you're not consistent about putting it in place, you'll never establish brand recognizability.

If the tone of your company is "fun, light and noncontroversial", steer clear of anti-war demonstrations. If Arial is your font of choice, then don't go switching it up mid-campaign and putting out affiliate program materials using Tahoma. If tongue-in-cheek humor is how you attract attention, don't line your website borders with super-mushy personal ads. Ask yourself: will this resonate with my key customer? And use your logo and company tagline wherever possible—in your email correspondence, on your website, as your letterhead, on your business cards, in your advertising and on your product packaging. Remind people of who you are. Burn your brand into their minds.

To some extent, branding is following the herd... emulating respected companies that capture what you'd like to be known for. Still, a wise entrepreneur must never forget that today's success story is tomorrow's dot-com that went under. "What sold" for someone else may not work for your company. Just because Joe Baloney made millions selling with a bilingual circus clown doesn't mean that will work for you... or that anyone's even going to find it remotely interesting in six months. The market changes like the tide, depending on what direction society is going in. Where they were before, which way they're headed, and wherever it's likely they'll end up... socially, economically, ethically, politically, culturally, intellectually, psychologically, philosophically.

How will you know that you've branded successfully? When people start listening to you. Not just hearing what you say, but letting you call the shots. You'll know it when people start imitating you, too. You'll start seeing knock-offs of your products and your company image. This may flatter you or it may annoy you, but when it happens, it's your cue to lead the pack in a new direction. That's how to stay on top of the Branding Game.

The day that you find yourself functioning as a real, live spokesman for a group of individuals, is the day you've achieved Brand Recognition. The day that you make the front page news headlines is the day you've become a household name. But a word to the wise: once your brand achieves true power, someone will try and take you down. Remind them that you own this cow.

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Dina Giolitto is a New–Jersey based Copywriting Consultant with nine years' industry experience. Her current focus is web content and web marketing for a multitude of products and services although the bulk of her experience lies in retail for big–name companies like Toys"R"Us. Visit <http://www.wordfeeder.com> for rates and samples.

Branding

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Branding

Often the more a thing is discussed the less it is understood. Words have a point of diminishing return. That point is crossed when the effort to be clear and precise counts every tree standing, but misses the proverbial forest. Such is the case with branding.

Because the idea of branding is all the rage, people are tempted to think that it is a new idea. It is not. It's roots reach back into history.

The Old West

Let's go back to the Old West where brands were burned into the hind quarters of cattle. The thing branded was the cow, the product produced by the ranching endeavor. The brand itself was the twisted iron logo on the end of the rod that left its image or mark on the hide of the cow. Cows were roped, tied and branded in order to identify them, should they be stolen. The brand was a mark of identity, as it is in the corporate world.

Some ranchers also used their logo as a welcome sign wrought in iron over the gates of the corral or over the road leading to the rancher's home. Again, the brand identified the ranch. Some ranchers even got their cowhands belt buckles with the ranch logo to identify them as employees. And over time logoed merchandise began to pop up on boots, hats, shirts, etc.

Identity

The brand is essentially a mark of identity. It identifies the ranch or company, and has come to represent or suggest the values and character of the company, and of its leaders. The brand is associated with the character of the company, as well as its products.

The early history of branding was always personal. Where does the ranch or company get the values and character that are associated with it? From its owners and leaders, and from their business practices.

Branding as we know it today is the art of instilling and communicating the values and character of a company or organization through association with its logo. Psychology calls it symbolic association,

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and finds it to be foundational to the learning process. Symbolic association has deep roots in human experience and in history.

Fish, Cross & Swastika

We find that branding as a practice began very early in history. The sign of the fish and the cross were symbols used by the early Christians. Over time they became Christian brands.

The Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision of a red cross in the sky before the battle of Saxa Rubra, October 28, 312, near Rome. He put that red cross on his shields and flags, branding the Holy

Roman Empire for centuries.

On August 7, 1920, at the Salzburg Congress, a red flag bearing the Swastika became the official emblem of the Nazi Party, as Hitler branded the Third Reich. While our emotional reaction to the Swastika is usually negative, both the fact and the intensity of our response to it points to the power of branding. Most people probably have an emotional reaction to the examples above. That emotional reaction is the aim of branding.

It must be recognized that a branding effort does not always turn out the way the campaign intends. The cross was intended to be a symbol of derision, but became a symbol of grace and mercy. The Swastika was intended to be a symbol of the triumph of the Arian race, but has become a symbol of evil. In both cases branding was achieved, but not in the way intended.

Of course, companies want the emotional association to their brand to be positive—even to generate an urge to splurge, or trust sufficient to sustain a transaction. But regardless of one's personal reaction to a symbol, the fundamental mechanics of branding involve soliciting an emotional response to a symbol.

There are two fundamental elements in the branding process. The first pertains to the symbol, the second to the association.

The Symbol

The symbol itself must be familiar. The more the symbol or logo is seen, the more familiar it becomes. The most successful branding campaigns will have a lot of sustained media coverage and use a variety of advertising mediums. This does not mean that smaller campaigns cannot be successful, only that their success will be smaller. Familiarity is primarily a function of exposure.

The Association

Secondly, the emotional content of the association also needs to be familiar. Of course it is true that new desires and/or emotional content can be created. But the effort is both time consuming and risky. The result might be other than the desired effect.

The more successful method for creating a symbolic association employs well-established and widely valued characteristics, like love, honor, truth, freedom, etc. Successful branding campaigns establish symbolic associations between their products and/or company and such noble characteristics. What is

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noble inspires people, and what inspires is remembered and discussed. It creates buzz. And buzz is branding's engine.

To discuss the art of branding apart from these foundational elements is to miss the forest for the trees. However, branding is more than a mere advertising campaign can accomplish because the symbolic association that needs to be made for the branding to be successful involves the core values and character traits of the company— its leaders and its business practices.

Prior to branding, core values, character issues and company policies need to be determined, developed and deployed within the company. Because the process of branding reveals the values, character and policies of the company, those things need to be right, and be in place before they can be successfully revealed.

Premature Branding

A premature revelation of these things can be disastrous to the intention of the branding campaign. To be branded as hypocritical and shallow is worse than no branding at all. Again, branding occurs when an emotional response—any emotional response— is associated with a company symbol. The art of branding is to solicit the right emotional response.

So, what can be done to promote a brand? Begin by working to establish core values and character within and throughout the company. To be successfully branded is to be known widely for who you are. You want a great branding campaign? Be a great company. Aspire to the values and character traits of greatness and nobility. Herein lies the key to branding success.

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