

Branding: Reap What You Sow **by Kristine Kirby Webster**

January 28, 2003

It seems that now, more than ever, branding is becoming the "it" segment of the marketing and advertising arenas. Even the usually stodgy National Public Radio had a piece on it last week.

But what has become clear is that the more "branding" is discussed, the more it seems to become a dirty word in the minds of the ever-suspicious public. The consumer thinks of branding as shorthand for trying to dupe them into buying something they think they need, only to find it falls short on the actual expectation after purchase.

The brand's true strength lies in creating a relationship--not a one-time sale. A brand only has value over the long-term.

And in order to realize this, and to get the true idea of branding back on track, I think a bit of a primer is called for. So hang on--here I go!

In today's global economy, brands can supersede culture, language, and national borders. Many brands have such strong brand logo awareness that they are a global language unto themselves: the Coca-Cola logo, the McDonald's golden arches, the Mercedes hood ornament, Mickey Mouse and the Disney empire.

Additionally, the awareness of the logos is shorthand for the expectation of the brand: The golden arches make you almost taste the French fries, and the Mercedes symbol confers luxury and wealth on the owner in the mind of others.

The word "brand" is used frequently, but the true definition is not always known or understood. According to Robert Woyzbun, a brand is "the sum of the expectations that a customer or stakeholder has when purchasing a product or dealing with an organization."

In essence, a brand is an expectation waiting to be fulfilled, or a promise. The brand promise is a statement of assurance, and a perception of future excellence. The goal of the promise is to create a customer relationship.

But just how does a brand promise get created and communicated to the masses? And how does the relationship get created? Through branding!

Therefore, it is vital to define and understand the essence of branding in order to truly understand the role of the brand in the marketplace. Ron Gossen and Alicia Gresham have stated the general description of branding as "delivering all the promises and perceptions that the organization wants its constituents to hold."

However, Gossen and Gresham have fine-tuned the definition, making it less subjective and more focused. They assert that "branding is identifying or creating, and then exploiting, sustainable competitive advantage."

Branding is as simple and complex as that definition. The science of branding and deployment of the branding effort is clearly more complex than that phrase allows for; but the art or purpose of branding is indeed that simple--it is to achieve market share and sustainable advantage in the marketplace.

The definition as laid out by Gossen and Gresham embraces the 360-degree idea of branding; that is, the idea that the branding effort must encompass all parts of a marketing strategy, and

all parts of an organization. Their definition points out not only what branding is, but also what it should do, embracing both the idea and the actionable result of the idea.

It is necessary to point out that today's branding efforts require the acknowledgement of the emotional part of the consumer and the brand to the consumer. That's the origin of the reference to exploitation of the sustainable advantage. In other words, branding is a two-way street, and it should therefore take into account the wants and needs of the consumer, and the emotional impact of branding on the customer's purchase decision.

Many practitioners in the marketing and advertising fields think that branding and all its related offshoots belong predominately in the realm of advertising. This is simply not true.

Only through marketing can the true promise of a brand be fulfilled for the customer. Some brands grow without even advertising--such as Prêt À Manger, Starbucks, and Krispy Kreme. But none grow without marketing.

Marketing is where the delivery of the promise and expectation occurs. The delivery, if properly deployed and supported, provides much needed differentiation from the competition in the marketplace, and is your strategic edge in the crowded global market.

As Robert Woyzbun states, "Branding is a *marketing-based* [my emphasis] business strategy and philosophy that has the ultimate objective of building goodwill for and supporting the 'raison d'être' of a product, service or enterprise. When properly implemented, brand strategies provide clear and consistent differentiation in a given marketplace."

It is important to note that Woyzbun also states that branding is not a "logo, jingle, tagline, product, or positioning... [They are] representations of the brand or means to communicate what the brand stands for, but they are not the brand."

Branding requires a whole product or service view, from R&D to fulfillment. Branding does not exist or operate in a vacuum; its main objective is to create value for the customer through the brand strategy.

A well-executed and consistent branding campaign creates value for the customer, which creates goodwill that in turn translates to loyalty from the customer. Clearly, branding is an example of the old adage "you reap what you sow" at work.

So what elements are involved in branding successfully?

Branding requires, first and foremost, consistency and focus. The value of a brand is recognized and rewarded by creating a relationship with the marketplace and the consumer. And in order for this to happen, consistency and focus in all brand planning, messages, and deployment must occur.

Additionally, in order to fully utilize the strength and benefits of branding, it is important to understand that the 360-degree view of branding encompasses two main parts: external branding and internal branding.

Most people, when speaking of "branding," are speaking of what is traditionally thought of as external branding. External branding refers to both the tangible (price, performance, service) and intangible (status, prestige, personal expression) benefits the brand offers the consumer. Internal branding refers to efforts aimed at those inside the company to establish a consistent and coherent image for the brand.

Only when both are addressed clearly and comprehensively in the brand strategy can true relationships and longevity with consumers and the marketplace be created and maintained. The true benefit of branding is realized through cumulative positive and consistent brand experiences.

So, go and look at your brand and ask yourself, does your brand sow as it wishes to reap?