

Brand matters in a recession

Many companies respond to recession by cutting the marketing budget and running for cover. Those who continue to invest in their brand are likely to win share and emerge fitter.

A recession such as we are currently experiencing means, for most companies, fewer new business leads, reductions in sales volumes, tougher competitive conditions, more pressure on pricing and consequent reduction in net margins. The inevitable response to all this is to cut costs, often beginning with marketing. Anyone suggesting that investment in brand should continue is likely to be greeted with hostility. How should marketers respond and how can they make a real difference?

The answer lies in fighting for brand but from a different angle.

In a sentence, **brand precision and alignment will result in increased demand and higher value.** Thought given to what the brand stands for and alignment of every part of the business to that core idea will pay dividends by creating buyer clarity and a coherent customer experience that can command a premium.

So let's be clear. This is not about big marketing spends. This is about getting the fundamentals of the brand right when it really counts. It's about honing the resources you already have to maximise their market impact. If you get it right, your brand should be the sharpest weapon at your disposal in the war for more and better business.

In the typical business pitch, the sales person is constantly seeking competitive advantage. They need feeding with:

- Differential advantage
- Succinct and persuasive messaging
- Relevant client benefits
- Value added propositions

They also need to be sure that after the sale, the delivery will live up to expectations in terms of a consistent and coherent customer experience that will lead to loyalty and re-purchase.

All of this is a tough call for even the most talented and experienced sales person. Often the tools in their toolkit are either missing altogether or somewhat blunt. Investing time, effort and resource in the brand will ensure that they have the sharpest set of tools with which to impress their customer and defeat their competitors.

Three things are needed:

- Understanding
- Clarity
- Alignment

Understanding

There needs to be an appreciation from top to bottom of the firm that brand is not just about communications or identity. It's about everything that everyone in the company

says or does. It's not about what you say about yourself. It's about what your customers think of you. It's not just about the rational, it's also (and probably more so) about the emotional – the feelings of your customers about what you provide and how you provide it.

It then becomes abundantly clear that brand can't be left to the marketing department. It has to be the province of the CEO. If the CEO doesn't get it, forget it.

Clarity

If a brand is what your customers think of you, it follows that you can either leave them to have random thoughts or you can manage their experience such that they think what you would like them to think. No, not just tell them what to think (wouldn't that be nice...), but deliver a compellingly attractive, coherent and universally consistent experience so that the impression left with each customer conforms to the desired brand attributes.

Before you can begin to create such an experience, there needs to be a crystal clear definition of the desired brand – why it exists at all, its competitive position, the rational and emotional value it delivers, its personality and its core idea. This takes time to do well and may need some outside help, but it's probably the best investment you'll ever make.

Alignment

With the first two pieces in place, the next part should be easy, or at least relatively so. Quite simply this is about ensuring that at every point at which the customer touches the business, they experience what you would like them to experience, as dictated by the brand definition. This will involve the behaviour of your people, the style of your offices, the efficiency of your systems and processes, the attractiveness of your products and services and (yes of course) the precision and appeal of your communications.

This may sound daunting, but the great thing is that it's not about spending more money. It's about pointing what you're already doing in one direction. Getting the herd to go west.

In summary

If you were to ask 100 CEOs whether they should be cutting costs or investing in their brand right now, the response would be predictable. But time spent in understanding what really drives their brand, defining it clearly and engineering a consistent brand experience is a different kind of investment. An investment that will significantly sharpen their short-term sales effort as well as leaving them substantially more competitive for the longer term, at the end of the current downturn.

Brand matters, especially now.

Contact Geoff Dodds Consultants:

E geoff@geoffdodds.com
T +44 (0) 7802 476 126
W www.geoffdodds.com