

“Brand Me”

Thinking about your personal brand can make it easier to appreciate the nature of organisational brands.

No matter how hard the marketing community has tried, it appears to have failed to communicate the true meaning of the word “brand”. This is a significant failing, because brands add shareholder value, in all industries, not just consumer goods. So if more C-suite executives understood brand, arguably they would make more money for their shareholders.

The problem is that, whatever is said to the contrary, the default position most people adopt is that brand equates to name or logo or at best communications. Hence the frequent, critical news stories about the latest high profile brand exercise – Consignia, Monday, Abbey, London 2012, to name but a few.

How to convince the media and the public that there may be more to these stories than meets the eye? How to communicate that brand is influenced by everything an organisation says or does? How to rescue the ever diminishing reputation of brand?

We’re all brands now

One way is to make it personal. To think about brand in relation to ourselves. To think about our personal brand. “Brand me”.

Whether we like the idea or not, we are all brands.

As with any brand, we each have a label, a name by which we can be recognised. More importantly, as with any brand, people who know us or know of us hold a set of perceptions about us in their minds. As with any brand, we could speak to these people and build a profile of our personal brand - its attributes, its values, its personality, its “positioning” against its peers. As with any brand, the perceptions people hold are influenced by many things.

What drives our brands?

Firstly there are the more obvious, tangible factors such as our name and our visual identity – appearance, clothes, accessories, home environment, possessions. Then there are less obvious, but arguably more fundamental aspects, such as the kind of job we do, our abilities, the way we think, the way we approach issues, the way we behave, our beliefs and attitudes, our values and personality.

There’s the way we communicate – what we say, how we speak, what we write, our body language. There are the relationships we have or choose to form – family, friends, personal and business partnerships. All of these things contribute, some more than others, to the impression we leave, our “brand equity,” in marketing speak.

In the same way, an organisational brand is influenced by the products and services it sells, the behaviour of its people, the physical environment in which it operates, what it says about itself, the way it communicates, its name and visual identity.

In other words, our personal brand is influenced by everything we say and do. The same applies to organisations.

Some drivers are more equal than others

What is interesting is that, if you think about your personal brand, some of those influencers are more important than others.

Name is probably one of the least important. However peculiar someone's name, they are rarely judged by it in the longer term and, once known, it is generally just accepted. It seems odd therefore that there is so much media excitement about each new corporate re-branding, mostly focused on the name.

Much more important and more influential to your personal brand are your behaviour, your values and your personality. "Brand Beckham" may be influenced by good looks, glitz and glamour, but how much of its longevity has been influenced by David Beckham's under-stated personality, his leadership qualities, his basic human decency?

Organisational brands are influenced by different factors depending on the nature of their business.

Apple is largely influenced by its products – beautifully designed and desirable. Harrods is influenced by its environment – just think of the food hall. Coke is influenced by its communications – years of investment in "the real thing". First Direct is influenced by the behaviour of its staff – outstanding customer service, consistently delivered around the clock.

This is not to argue that other factors are unimportant. Apple has great advertising and amazing retail outlets. Harrods has great staff. First Direct has first rate systems. Coke has superb distribution. In all organisations, anything that touches the customer is important to the brand.

But just as in your personal brand, it is behaviour, values and personality that are the real drivers. Increasingly these are the factors that drive corporate brands. Given all the information available to the public, companies can no longer hide behind a (falsely) positive brand façade. Their true character becomes clear as their views and actions are exposed. Witness a number of recent corporate downfalls.

Can you manage your brand?

Can you control your personal brand and is it possible to change brand perceptions?

The accepted wisdom in corporate branding is that both are possible. So what about your personal brand?

Increasingly we hear of celebrities who are said to have a strong and valuable "brand" and who work hard to maintain control over their "brand equity". We probably all know someone personally who makes more effort than normal to control the impact that they have on others.

How can you do that? What rules apply? And is it the same for an organisation?

Perhaps the most obvious rule is that perceptions about you amongst those who know you tend to be well entrenched. You couldn't change those perceptions overnight, even if you wanted to. People are naturally sceptical about change and will look for consistent evidence of that change over a period of time.

This applies equally to organisations, which is partly why “brand launches and re-launches” are greeted with such scepticism. The very idea of a “launch” suggests that someone is going to try to persuade me that everything is different.

The second rule is that any change must be authentic. You can't move from being a traditional dresser to become an icon of fashion without a real change of behaviour to accompany the new identity. A Trinny and Susannah makeover might help give you the inner confidence to begin to act differently, but that's as far as it will go.

In the same way, an organisation's new identity might act as support to a change of internal culture, but it's the change of behaviour that will shift perceptions.

Thirdly, there needs to be coherence and consistency across all the influencing factors, if you're to avoid a schizophrenic effect. Improving your personal efficiency and attention to detail is likely to be undermined by continued scruffiness of your appearance or surroundings.

Organisations who re-brand find this very hard to manage. It takes real effort to align the entire business behind a desired brand position, so that customers receive a consistent and coherent experience, which lives up to the promise made in its communications.

Finally, you have to take people with you. If you were going to make some personal changes, it's likely that you would spend some time explaining them to your friends. You would probably take some of your closer friends or family into your confidence in advance, so that they understand what you are trying to achieve.

The same applies to an organisation. Managing the expectations of staff and customers and taking them with you on the journey is critical to successful change.

When will we ever learn?

The interesting point is that these principles seem so obvious when we think about our personal brand, but when it comes to an organisation some of them are overlooked or they just seem too hard to implement.

Brands are launched or re-launched without the appropriate preparation or at an inappropriate time. They are launched with a fanfare of publicity, but no real substance beneath the hype. The identity is given a makeover, but nothing else changes. A shiny new identity is used to paper over a badly aligned business. The company is re-branded but no time is spent in explaining to staff what it means to them personally.

You could put the blame for these failures at the door of the marketing community. But the truth is that the real fault lies with the leadership of the organisations. If more CEOs understood the true nature of brand and what makes a strong organisational brand, they would be more attuned to successful brand management.

Time spent thinking about their personal brands might help.

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