

Brand Thinking Is Stuck in Yesteryear

Simply put, a brand is an indelible impression. The term brand derives from the practice of burning the rancher's mark on the hides of cattle. It cannot be erased and identifies a distinct relationship between the bovine and the rancher: ownership.

In business branding, however, we make a major mistake if we think that the logo or image placed on a product or service is the brand and there is nothing more to customers feeling a sense of connectedness or ownership. The company logo, even with a tagline or positioning statement, is not in itself the brand. Brand is not a thing, logo, image, graphic, or statement.

The brand is a combination of what the company wants to be known by and how it, in fact, is known -- a desired reputation made reality.

This may sound straightforward and unarguable. But, think about it carefully... how many brand marketers are focused on communicating the company's position to gain consistent imagery along with a distinctive value that resonates in the hearts and minds of customers? They see their job as proactive outreach: build awareness, familiarity, consideration, preference, and loyalty. Push the brand into the market, attract prospects, and

reinforce customer attachment. Job done. But, viewing the issue of building brand loyalty in this manner is like playing baseball with a ball but no bat -- it is only half of what is needed.

The rub is that the brand is also what the customer experiences. The customer interacts with far more than the logo, ad, or marketing collateral; there is a product or service involved. The customer's impression of the company is formed by not just the marketing communication, but by the product or service the customer experiences. The Nike swoosh grew to mean something special not just as a logo but because of the product performance, use occasions, associations with top performance, and more. The Starbucks logo grew to mean something special not just because of the logo but because of the barista experience in a neighborhood coffee shop.

The experience is the brand. The brand is the experience. To be sure, the marketer's challenge is to define what ideally the brand

should stand for to gain competitive advantage, and then to get this position communicated to the market. But, stopping there exemplifies the playing-baseball-with-no-bat approach. The marketer must ensure the brand is implemented in the customer experience with the product or service. I prefer the definition of brand to be the following:

The brand is a promise executed throughout the customer experience.

In this context, the brand moves greatly beyond the logo, slogan, tagline, positioning, and the accompanying advertising and messaging, to become the differentiated value realized throughout the customer experience. The brand represents what you can expect. It stands for something and delivers on it. The company is essentially saying, "I promise that you will get 'X.'" The question is whether the customer indeed does get "X." In sum, the need is to gain clarity on the desired promise for the brand, and then to define specifically how that promise will be executed in the total customer experience. The following exhibit puts it simply:



Which part of the above exhibit is the brand?

The answer is: both parts. The problem is that marketers often focus only on defining and communicating the promise and leave the “living the promise” to others. Then, they measure the brand promise in the market and discover that it is not gaining the attraction and customer bonds desired. Then the marketer says, “We need to define our promise differently... we need a different position... or, we need a new ad campaign.” Could be. But, the issue also could be that what is needed is the consistent and purposeful execution of the promise in the customer experience. The promise is made but not being lived via the touchpoints with the company.

What are the implications of the above?

They are vast:

The marketer’s frame of reference around brand needs to fundamentally change. Gone are the days when branding meant only the icon or symbol or position and the communicated associations around it. Cadillac could not have changed its customer base by simply communicating a new message. They had to change the product experience, too.

One may think, “I get this, I know this.” Do you?

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have you as a marketer looked at your job as fundamentally intertwined with operations folks?
2. Do you measure what in the customer touchpoints makes the brand come alive for customers?
3. Do you measure brand associations like trust or coolness or whatever, and then scratch your head wondering how to close the gaps?
4. Do you get data from brand research companies and then get frustrated because you don’t know how to take action on it?
5. Do you look for opportunities in the customer experience to purposefully create emotional bonds with customers?
6. Do leaders in your organization as well as the front line people see themselves as brand ambassadors?
7. Do people know what to do to “live” the brand?
8. Do your processes deliver your unique brand value?

If you would like to talk to us about how to build and measure your brand, we would be pleased to discuss how we might help with research and consulting.

Hansa provides a full range of qualitative and quantitative research services. Our experienced research and consulting team, including PhD-level statisticians, uses innovative, data-driven methodologies tailored to our clients' research needs.

We pride ourselves on our ability to truly understand the voice of the customer and translate that voice into winning strategies for brand development, marketing communications, customer relationship enhancement, and product/service innovation.