

# Branding *at the* Core

Five steps to unlock your brand's identity and unleash business growth.

Those of us who have been in brand marketing for some time can't help but remember the good old days of building brands. There were fewer brands to choose from, fewer outlets in which to sell those brands and far fewer competitors.

Back then, as marketers of fast-moving consumer goods, we learned the "traditional" classes of trade (food, drug, and mass) and we had brand fact-books that included information about our two or three key competitive brands.

Fast-forward to 2007 and the lines between the traditional channels have blurred. There are now club stores, value stores, convenience stores, specialty stores, and of course, the internet. Depending on the category in which you compete, other category specific outlets also play a role. Gaining a consumer's trust and loyalty has never been more challenging.

Along with the development of new shopping locations has come the advent of a multitude of new niche brands and an innovation cycle that gets shorter by the minute. Without a long-term vision of where you want to take your brand and a strategic plan on how to do it, one can easily get caught in the short-term exercise of simply replicating last year's pipeline.

That's a losing battle all the way around to competitors as they out-innovate you, gain consumer loyalty and valuable shelf space; to consumers, as what your brand stands for becomes more and more muddled; and to customers as your position as a thought-leader diminishes and your shelf space, positioning and merchandising plans fall by the wayside (as leading competitors expand their footprints).

The key to staying away from that vicious "pipeline" cycle is not only understanding, but also sticking to your brand's identity and consistently communicating it in all brand activities and interaction points with your consumers and your shoppers.

That sounds simple, but as you might guess, it is definitely easier said than done. Defining one's brand identity and then communicating it constantly and consistently to your consumers as well as your customers requires a serious commitment. It means sometimes saying "no" to the latest fad in the category because it is inconsistent with what your brand stands for, and allowing another brand in the portfolio to ride that wave.

So, how should we go about defining a brand's identity? Let's lay the foundation by defining the term "brand identity" as the brand's outward expression of what it stands for—its promise to consumers and the benefit it provides to them...*uniquely* from other brands.

Brand identity is *the* critical element to defining and differentiating your brand and to developing a loyal following of brand advocates and, importantly, customer advocates. It is the platform from which to extend your brand footprint both in the short- and the long-term.

The big question is *how* to develop a vision for where you want to take your brand. What is the promise or benefit that your brand provides to consumers? And how best to communicate this message to consumers and customers?

These are not easy questions to answer, and to answer them correctly takes a lot of work. But getting it right is the bridge from managing a struggling business to developing a very valuable asset.



FIGURE 1

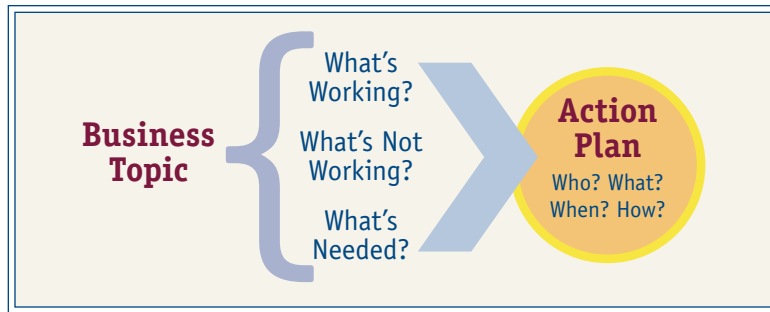


FIGURE 2

#### FIVE KEY AREAS

There are five key areas of exploration you need to undertake to uncover your brand's identity and unleash it for growth in the marketplace (see figure 1).

There are several ways to address each of these five business topics. What we have found to be most effective is a straightforward method of breaking each of these five areas into several distinct buckets: 1) What's working?; 2) What's not working?; and 3) What's needed? (see figure 2) From there, it's a matter of designing an action plan around each of these groupings, complete with accountabilities and metrics.

To get started with the brand identity process, the initial question gets at the heart of the matter: "What business am I in?" The answer lies in your brand's history and current activities (future plans for the business may or may not change based on the outcome).

In searching for the answer, it's important to reach out to all of your brand's key constituents—its consumers, its customers, and importantly its competitors—or at least develop a clear definition of who the competitors are and the brand's relative strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the competitive set.

For each arena probed, you will need to organize the learnings into what's working, what's not, and what's needed. By keenly understanding the brand promise and benefit to the consumer, as well as the role that it plays for the customer, you'll be able to leverage some natural extensions to the business, both short- and long-term, while concurrently defining your boundaries and limitations, such as where the brand will *not* play.

A similar deep-dive exercise should be conducted to get at a) the way you do business (the brand/company culture); b) how to grow the current portfolio; c) how to approach creating new business platforms that fit to the brand identity; and importantly, d) assessing the organization to ensure that you have the right knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors internally to bring the brand identity to life in the marketplace—both for consumers and customers.

#### NOT JUST ADVERTISING

Oftentimes the mistake is made in relying on advertising to be the primary—if not the sole—communicator of the brand identity.

How often have we seen a brand with a "premium" communication in its advertising but offered at a deeply discounted price point in store, or shelved or merchandised in a manner that just was not at all consistent with the brand promise? Or a brand that's funky and edgy in its advertising doing the "same old-same old" when it comes to the shopping experience in store?

Concurrent with the development of consumer communications (advertising across all media, promotion, and event/experiential marketing efforts), remember to consider all customer and shopper communications programs.

As you're developing these communication platforms, you need to think about the message and the messenger.

Similar to the way we think of television, magazines, or the web as media (a.k.a. messengers) to deliver the communication to the consumer, we should be thinking of our sales people as messengers who deliver the message to the customer, and our customers as messengers to the shopper.

In short, there is no question as to the value of a strong and differentiated brand identity. It is the key to unlocking a future of loyal customers, loyal consumers and a healthy, growing business.

The secret is to distill the essence of your brands and ensure thorough and consistent communications of its distinct attributes to consumers, customers and the broader marketplace. ■



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