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Improve Your Brand I.D.



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A brand identity or vision is the aspirational image of what you want your brand to stand for. Too often a brand will have an identity that is too vague with a corresponding lack of direction about which programs should be stimulated to make it come to life. The solution is to elaborate the key identity elements in four ways.

Strategic Imperatives

A strategic imperative is a strategic investment in an asset or program that is necessary for your aspirational image to be achieved or maintained. If your brand wants to be known as sincere and helpful, what programs need to be put in place? What are the strategic imperatives? If your company will not fund such programs, then it is time to rethink the brand.

A regional bank, for example, may aspire to have customer relationships based on all its customer touch points. An imperative might be to improve the IT system so that a customer service rep has all the customer's accounts available. If that bank aspires to deliver a friendly interaction, there may be a need to develop new training programs and new guidelines for performance evaluation.

Proof Points

Proof points are programs, initiatives and assets already in place that provide substance to the core identity and help communicate what it means. They provide credibility to customers and employees that the brand is based on proven substance and not wholly on future programs.

Retailer L.L. Bean has an identity dimension of being geared toward outdoorsy people. Proof points include a heritage of having designed a waterproof hiking boot for hunters in 1912 and of bonding with those involved in hunting, fishing, camping and hiking. The flagship store, which stays open 24 hours a day, with its breadth of products and knowledgeable staff, demonstrates the scope and depth of its expertise.

Internal Role Models

Symbolic role models are programs, events, stories or people that are on-target representatives of the brand identity—they hit the bull's eye. The invention of Post-it Notes, by a 3M engineer who needed a bookmark that would not flutter to the floor while singing in the choir, is a story that reflects the innovation culture that is part of the core identity of 3M. Johnson & Johnson demonstrated its priorities when it responded to the Tylenol poison scare by pulling its products from stores and designing a safer package. This response clearly showed that J&J's reputation for trust and safety was more important than the cost of a recall.

Sometimes, particularly when a change in brand image is needed, new role models need to be developed. The experience of a large energy company is instructive. In part to identify symbolic role models, a contest asked employees to identify the programs and activities that best represent the brand thrust of leadership, partnership and trust. The winner got an insider's seat to the Indy 500. The contest received more than 300 entries, which provided a set of role models and involved employees in the brand identity.

External Role Models

Internal role models can be extremely powerful because they are already in the brand context. However, they are limited to what has been done within the organization. Casting the net wider, to dozens or hundreds of organizations, usually results in role models with more impact and imagination. What brand do you admire? Which comes closest to how you would like your brand to be perceived?

A bank that aspires to provide a trusted adviser role offering a broad array of financial services in a friendly but competent style might look to Home Depot. Home Depot carries a wide variety of merchandise, has an approachable, friendly face and helps customers with knowledge and substance. Customers can get professional help from someone who is not pretentious. When the bank's identity is framed in terms of Home Depot, the identity becomes more vivid. Another bank aspiring to provide customers with a team of

people capable of delivering an array of financial services might look to Young & Rubicam, which delivers communication services using multifunctional, virtual teams organized around clients.

When Tony Blair became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom he conceptualized the New Britain as a brand. The brand identity included elements such as openness, Europe and technology, multiculturalism and female power. One exercise was to identify the brands that most represented New Britain. The top brands on the New Britain scale were Häagen-Dazs ice cream, Twinings herbal tea, Hooch-brand alcoholic beverages, New Covent Garden Food Co. soup, Linda McCartney-brand meals, Shape yogurt and Phileas Fogg-brand snacks. The identity of these brands not only clarifies the New Britain brand but also provides directions for cross-promotional brand building.

The elaboration exercises provide clarity to the brand identity. All four elements generate a rich picture of brand identity from very different perspectives. They also provide an action program. The strategic imperative and proof points provide some "must dos" and "must maintains" that can challenge the organization. The role models can stimulate effective programs: Why were they selected? How did they come to be? Can they be replicated or adapted? It is hard to go through this exercise without some ideas for brand building that will be out-of-the-box and effective. **m**

The four elements of the brand identity elaboration process paint a rich picture from very different perspectives.

