

ROMI ● *The inside track*

Beware of pitfalls that kill branding efforts

By BEN MACHTIGER

A friend of mine recently was targeted by a major financial services organization that considers him a “valued customer” for a major business-building initiative using a substantial—and no doubt expensive—advertising campaign. This new branding and business expansion effort was geared toward simplifying my friend’s life by orchestrating his entire financial world.

Several months after the campaign’s launch, my friend received a copy of a glossy magazine featuring the new initiative, an example of solid marketing communications integration. On each of the next five days, however, he received another copy, each tied to a subaccount number within his general account. After several weeks, my friend had collected a stack of envelopes regarding each subaccount’s Web passwords, account statements and other information unrelated to the branding initiative.

Such a redundant set of communications left my friend less than confident that this organization could simplify his financial world. While the company’s marketing and strategy gurus probably spent much time developing new internal capabilities and an understanding of the program, they had clearly paid insufficient attention to the real customer experience.

This company is not alone. The state of

brand-building is quite mixed, and much of the problem lies in the focus put on building the brand rather than the effect on the customer. However, companies are beginning to realize that the true test of a brand lies less in an ad campaign’s success and more in the customer’s direct interaction with the brand and people within the organization. In fact, a brand’s moment of truth is whether employees can fulfill customer expectations. As a result, all the millions of dollars spent on heavy advertising are wasted if employees do not know, and are not equipped to deliver, the promises that have been communicated to customers.

Keeping the programs centered on the external customer experience begins with making sure that brand-building efforts can work effectively internally. If the employees within your company aren’t sure what the brand stands for, you can’t expect a brand strategy to work outside of company walls. With that in mind, success in navigating today’s challenging brand-building waters lies in greater awareness of the six pitfalls that exist in building your brand with internal audiences—and how to avoid them:

◆ **Pitfall No. 1: rooting the branding program solely in internal communications efforts.** Many organizations launch what might be called brand road shows or similar approaches to get their message out to employees. This tactic often centers on broadcasting a message internally instead of creating real behavioral change. The brand is defined, but the inter-

nal conditions, processes and resources needed to allow employees to deliver the corresponding experience to customers are not sufficiently addressed. The result is a brand that overpromises and underdelivers. Companies instead need to infuse the brand strategy into all facets of the customer experience.

Secondarily, this “broadcast model” also tends to underestimate the time involved to truly realize the brand within the organization. It’s all about developing a genuine and ongoing commitment to the brand, not building short-term buzz. Establishing a solid foundation to develop a long-term brand-centric environment can take between 12 and 36 months, depending on the size and culture of the organization.

◆ **Pitfall No. 2: failure to back internal branding efforts with the resources, support and planning commonly allocated to external marketing efforts.** While external marketing becomes more intricate, segmented and targeted, internal communications too often remain a blunt instrument. For a brand to take root in the minds of customers, the marketing and advertising efforts must be supported with substantial resources. Marketers are generally sensitive to global, cultural and industry differences and adapt the brand accordingly. Yet, when it comes to building their brands internally, managers tend to throw everything they have learned through experience out the window.

Employees are a different audience than

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customers and listen with different ears, but many of the core external marketing principles are fully applicable internally: audience segmentation, tailored messages, careful timing, multimedia channels, performance incentives and technology utilization.

◆ **Pitfall No. 3: being seduced by new advertising campaigns, shiny new names or logos.** We have all also seen the phenomenon of using internal alerts of breaking ad campaigns as primary vehicles for internal brand education.

United Airlines' "Rising" campaign was a classic example of an external brand program that failed to take into full account the internal implications. The campaign was designed to elevate customer expectations of the United experience, but insufficient thought was apparently given to how to inspire or equip employees to deliver on brand promises conveyed in the advertising. What could have been a differentiating experience for customers could not be delivered or fulfilled by the organization, and, arguably, the campaign seriously denigrated the company's brand.

Overemphasizing "marketing communications" to enlist employee and customer support is also dangerous because in many categories—particularly in b-to-b markets—it is the *post-purchase* use and service experiences that largely drive repeat purchase behavior. The focus should always be on the day-to-day fundamentals that may drive constituent behavior.

◆ **Pitfall No. 4: regarding the brand-building effort as the exclusive province of marketing and communications.** A more effective tack is to take the healthier, multifunctional view that delivering the brand strategy requires the active engagement of almost all facets of the organization.

Dell Inc. is a great example of a company that clearly does it the right way. You could argue that Dell's logistics, pricing, product development and direct sales professionals are doing as much to make the brand promise in the marketplace as do classic mar-

keting communications efforts such as advertising. The fact that all Dell functional areas understand that delivering on the brand promise is key to differentiating its products and services is clear from every angle—from the advertising to the sales function to the customer service arenas.

◆ **Pitfall No. 5: failing to integrate brand-building programs into other internal efforts.** Since brand initiatives often are not integrated with a company's vision, mission or culture programs, employees can cynically see internal brand-building programs as yet another flavor-of-the-month initiative. Although these kinds of efforts often have their own timing, owners, sequencing and so forth, companies do a disservice to employees when they do not try to connect the dots—show how the pieces fit together and clarify expectations about what they should focus on and do. Having a strong brand can help define the way employees should work together and can lead to more consistent decision-making.

◆ **Pitfall No. 6: overdependence on technology in building better brand understanding.** The digital revolution has helped transform the brand-building process, with intranets and the Web playing leading roles in fueling widespread dissemination of relevant information that expands brand awareness and understanding. Internally, technology can reach corners of organizations that may have otherwise been ignored and unheard. The very act of interaction can be culture-building in itself, as employees feel they are part of the greater whole.

Companies must be careful, however, not to place too much reliance on technology to create change internally. If the technology is not supported by tools to support the vision or to translate the received knowledge into actionable behavior, then the medium simply compounds the pitfall of the broadcast model discussed in point No. 1.

Avoiding these pitfalls—or digging out of them—takes multiple examinations of cur-

rent operations and future strategies. Doing so requires a comprehensive evaluation of the customer experience to determine where to focus internal brand-building energies and programs. Efforts must be centered on identifying ways to engage employees in ways that will help them better deliver the brand strategy to customers externally.

Companies also must adopt a targeted approach to launching internal programs, instead of simply broadcasting a new brand bible throughout the organization. Launching such initiatives through segmented employee work sessions can help expand and explain the core of the approach more efficiently than other, broader approaches. Employees also become more informed, confident and motivated to deliver the brand's promise to customers.

It also helps to bring the sophistication of the external branding program to internal marketing, including the use of segmentation and metrics. Additionally, delivering the right message at the right time is as important for employees as it is for customers. The company can gain much by preparing employees to be ready to help with the branding cause, ensuring that the process can be fully supported by the organization over the long haul.

Working effectively from the inside out ultimately helps all facets of the brand-building program. Employees better understand their role in enhancing the customer experience in addition to participating in the development of the overall effort. Using external brand-building approaches in internal programs also offers the opportunity to refine the messages you ultimately want to send. In the end, making a concerted effort to avoid internal branding pitfalls increases the odds that the business will experience the return on brand investment that management is always hoping to see. ■

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