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Consistency, Management and Time

It took me the better part of a 37-year career in marketing communications to convince myself that my definition of Brand was the right one – and to start convincing others.

“How the hell is a new logo going to turn around our company?”

(Almost) An Instinct client

Sometimes I wish I'd done my career the other way around.

I spent the first 30 years of my working life running a marketing company, Promanad Communications. I sold it in 1998 and left two years later, and for the past seven years, I've had a Brand Coaching practice here at Instinct.

I enjoyed the Promanad years immensely. However, we could have used our resources – and our clients could have used theirs – much more effectively.

If only we had all understood what a “Brand” truly was.

In 1971, after studying at the Ontario College of Art, I started up Promanad with my father. Coming from a design background, I tended to think of Brand the same way that my client CEOs and all the ad agencies did – as mainly a matter of “creative,” the industry term that describes the ideas, words and design behind marketing and advertising materials. In other words, I believed, just like everybody else, that a Brand consisted mostly of a logo and advertising.

Even so, I tried to convince my clients that all of their marketing and advertising campaigns had to be built on a powerful communication device I called a “core idea.” Core ideas, like the Marlboro Man, Nike's silhouette of an airborne Michael Jordan or Subway's Jared (the guy who lost 200 pounds eating hoagies), express the essential truth of their Brands in ways that are relevant and compelling to the target audience.

It's vital that core ideas can stand the test of time, because if you want to keep your Brand in a customer's head, you had better first, tell them something real and essential about your Brand, and second, be consistent and not change the message all the time. Otherwise, people won't know what to think of your Brand from one day to the next.

The Challenge

Consistently communicate the core idea. For a variety of reasons, it was an almost impossible discipline to drive through client organizations when Promanad was growing in the 1970s and 80s. The main culprit was that, ironically, the ad agencies were then at the height of their power. They were in a position, quite the opposite of today, to easily deliver big sales increases for their clients.

Television typified how relatively straightforward it was. We lived in a universe of 13 channels, not 500 or a thousand. Because there were fewer ways to distribute corporate messaging, and because the overall pace of life was slower, customer attention wasn't nearly as fragmented as it is today. Relatively focused customer attention meant that advertisers just ran their spots to the huge audiences provided by the main networks, and the sales came rolling in.

The Tyranny of New Ideas

If a given campaign didn't work as well as expected, it was no big deal. Renewed success was as easy as the next new idea, creating a cavalier attitude among the ad agencies and their clients – which was, in fact, one of the main reasons that good campaigns failed in the first place. They weren't given time to take root, because the ad agencies and their clients were constantly rolling out new advertising with new core ideas – or with no core ideas at all.

Consistency was almost impossible to drive through client organizations.

Corporate Amnesia

Then there were the inevitable personnel changes that have always been a part of doing business. Even if we did manage to focus the minds of a client on communicating a consistent core idea, our contacts within the company would eventually move on, and that company's commitment to working on consistent Brand communications went out the door with them. There was simply no corporate memory.

The people who replaced them, quite naturally, came into their new jobs with a burning desire to prove themselves. But people don't typically set out to prove themselves by simply perpetuating the ideas of those who came before them. These "New Friends" inside the Brand organization discard the ideas of their predecessors – often, even if the ideas were working beautifully – and insist on their own new program in a bid to make their mark.

And so the client would direct us to abandon the “old” ideas and work on something new. We would grudgingly turn our backs on all the time that was spent developing the old ideas, abandon any momentum that may have been built up in the target audience, and start all over again.

Kill the Bunny?



Complicit with the Brand's New Friends were its “Old Friends” – the people on the client side who were bored or even hateful of the Brand message and were willing to do something, anything, to change it. Eventually it happens in every organization. I had Energizer batteries as a client for several years and every year we'd have a meeting to work on their strategy for selling through retail stores. Not a single meeting went by without one of the Energizer execs pleading with me: “Do we *have* to use that damn bunny again?”

Luckily we managed to convince them, year in and year out, to stick with the bunny. But the Energizer folks were an exception when it came to understanding the importance of consistency. They were able to suppress their murderous urges because the bunny – a powerful core idea – was such a runaway winner.

Formalizing the Brand (Part One)

Old Friends and New Friends kept our clients' Brand communications in a constant state of flux. I wondered: how will stakeholders – employees, customers, investors, suppliers, the media – know what to think of this Brand? How are they supposed to figure out what the Brand is from one day to the next?

That's when it hit me. How the customer views the Brand is in fact what the Brand is. Nothing else matters. The company's execs and its marketing department, busily preparing their next brochure or ad campaign, might *think* they know what the Brand is, but all they really know is what they *want* the Brand to be at that moment. It is stakeholders, each and every one of them, who get to decide what the Brand is.

In other words, A Brand is what people think of you™.

Instinct

Somewhere along the line, I noticed that entrepreneurs, in contrast to managers trained at business schools, seemed to instinctively understand this. They “just knew” that their Brand wasn't their logo or their advertising. They grasped that their Brand was the sum of every experience ever had, by anyone, with their organization.

The name of our firm, Instinct Brand Equity Coaches, embraces the entrepreneur's instinctive understanding of Brand. As they launch their enterprises, entrepreneurs can easily articulate the key elements of their Brand, especially their core purpose, vision, mission, position and values. They might not even think of these foundational elements in terms of “Brand” – they might not even have a label for any of these thoughts – but they focus tightly and relentlessly on them and ensure they are delivered to customers with ruthless consistency, because they understand that failure to do so means the end of their fledgling business.

The Brand Foundation

In a bid to protect client Brands from the whims of Old Friends and New Friends, we at Instinct have adopted the entrepreneur's innate flair for Branding – by articulating the key Brand elements in a Brand Foundation.

The Brand Foundation is created to survive the marketing manager, executive or CEO who replaces you and yes, your own boredom or impatience.

Managers

One of my key early assumptions was that the highly-paid, business school-trained executives at client companies knew, by virtue of their education and job position, what a Brand really was. These were the men and women who were not pure entrepreneurs, who (through no fault of their own) hadn't had to figure it all out for themselves to prevent their livelihood from going up in smoke.

But eventually I realized that these professional managers thought a lot like the ad agencies did. They thought the Brand was basically the logo and the advertising. I would tell these managers that proper Brand discipline could launch their company to new heights. But very recently, during the

writing of this book in fact, I met a top executive who asked: "How the hell is a new logo going to turn around our company?"

Don't get me wrong: I like professional managers. Some of my best friends are professional managers. It's not their fault that they've always equated the Brand with the logo and the advertising. They think this way because the business schools they went to, no matter how highly regarded, only talked about Brand in marketing class.

Because they only learned about Brand in marketing class, they relegate Brand management to their marketing department when they become CEOs, and then they don't especially worry about it from that point onward.

Formalizing the Brand (Part Two)

They don't realize that because a Brand is what people think of you, it's everything. It's every touchpoint that anyone ever has with your business. And when the Brand is this important, it can't be delegated away, but must be owned by the CEO – the only person in the organization with the clout to make sure that employees are delivering the Brand at each and every point of contact.

This Book – Why Now?

The core purpose of my firm is this:

To advance the sustainability of North American businesses, reinforcing our free enterprise system and ensuring our continued prosperity as a society.

You might find this audacious. But it's exactly why I founded this firm. The great majority of CEOs on this continent fundamentally misunderstand what Brand is all about, and I'm passionate that proper Brand discipline is the answer to three serious threats facing the prosperity of North Americans right now.

The Decline of Manufacturing

First is the continuing deterioration of our manufacturing base, as epitomized by the depressing decline of the supposed "Big Three" U.S. automakers. Think about the hundreds of thousands of jobs lost at Ford, Chrysler and GM since the 1990s. The weak Brands of these companies

have everything to do with their abysmal showing.

Ask just about anyone and they can easily tell you what differentiates BMW: performance. Volvo: safety. Mini: fun. Ask those same people what Ford stands for and their faces go blank. They're at a loss for a word.

In 2006, CEO Bill Ford announced plant closings, layoffs of up to 25% of his company's workforce, and the need to build cheaper cars that people want. That same week, BMW announced record sales and profits on their premium-priced vehicles. Ford is so desperate for cash that it's actually looking to sell its top division, Volvo – the maker of vehicles with one of the world's strongest Brand positions.

Led by carmakers like Toyota and BMW, foreign car Brands have differentiated themselves so clearly and consistently that in July 2007, for the first time in history, the “Big Three” sold less than 50% of cars purchased in the United States. A lot of foreign carmakers seriously understand Brand. We'd better start understanding it too. If not to save our automotive industry – which may well be impossible at this point – then to assert dominance in the areas that China and the other economic superpowers-in-waiting haven't already taken away.

Branding is not a matter of personal taste.

The Labor Market Crisis

For companies with an accurate understanding of Brand, a very promising area of opportunity appears in the face of another threat to North American business that companies are only recently waking up to: the looming labor crisis that is already confronting organizations in many regions across the continent.

By 2020, the number of Canadians over 65 will double. Add the shrinking birthrate and there will be a smaller-than-ever cohort of young people entering the working world to replace the old fogies. The graying of the U.S. workforce isn't expected to have much impact until perhaps 2040, but

another dynamic is at work across North America now. It is our ongoing transition to an information-based economy, and the increasingly high levels of job mobility this shift gives to knowledge workers.

So it's only going to get tougher to find employees, and then to keep them. This is all on top of the high costs of employee turnover in the here and now. Even the very best companies lose 10% of their people each year, and a super-strong Brand like Wal-Mart can experience annual turnover rates in excess of 100% at some locations.

How can Branding help your organization stay competitive amid the worsening market for labor? Simple. A strong, clearly communicated Brand helps potential employees understand, buy-in to and stick with your company in a way that high salaries alone never could.

Hyper-messaging

The third threat we face is that of hyper-messaging – the overwhelming number of commercial messages that bombard us each day. Because of the increasing number of ways in which we receive media, and the ever-greater number of tools we have to block out commercial appeals, it's only the strongest, most disciplined Brands that break through to stakeholders. More on this to come.

Consistency, Management and Time

Let's say that your favorite number is four. While sitting down with your accountant to review the financials in your business plan, would you ask that all the threes be changed to fours, just because you like them better?

When you're a Brand Coach, this type of thing is a regular request. It reflects the lack of awareness that Branding is a rule-based discipline like finance or accounting. So it's my job to tell clients that Branding is not a matter of personal taste – that there are unbreakable rules. As you'll see in this book, the unbreakable rules of Branding fall under three headings: *consistency*, *management* and *time*.

Consistency, because constant changes to your messaging means that stakeholders won't be able to figure out who you are – making it impossible for you to get and keep their loyalty.

Management, because if the CEO doesn't assume ultimate responsibility for the all-important Brand, employees won't deliver it in every stakeholder interaction.

Time, because if you want to earn and keep stakeholder mindshare over the long term, Branding must be understood as a process, not as an overnight event.

So start now!