

United we brand: The importance of brand consistency

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Your company's brand is what people think of you, and that's shaped by every interaction you have with your market. It's therefore crucial to ensure that every touchpoint with your company is consistent, that you present a clear and unvarying sense of what you're all about.

That's not easy, especially as your firm grows. As more and more people make decisions that affect your company, and by extension your brand, it becomes tougher to maintain consistency. Both your "old friends" (i.e., long-time staff) and "new friends" (new staff and outside creative suppliers) are likely to want to put their personal stamp on everything. It's natural for them to want to show their creativity — whether on your products, business cards, flyer, radio commercial, recruiting materials, training videos, reception area, e-mail formats, websites — everything!

Why? Because your old friends, who've seen the same message seemingly forever, are sure that, like them, customers have become tired and are ready for a new message. And your new friends who've just joined your firm are trying to do everything to impress, including leaving their fresh mark on projects or initiatives that come their way. New friends can also include the many outsourced creative suppliers who believe it just isn't creative unless it's all new and has never been seen before. And no group is more receptive to new ideas than old friends, who have long since become bored. Both groups have little respect for the No. 1 brand-building tool: consistency.

What happens when people get bored and consistency of brand message is ignored? Companies engage in off-brand behaviour and risk their hard-earned brand equity.

Consider this real-life example: Volvo differentiates itself from the hundreds of car choices in the market by "owning" the safety position. The company has earned it through relentless focus on the subject: they've been at the forefront of most safety-feature innovations in the automotive industry for the past 40 years. Yet recently, to try to make up for a series of service appointments and recalls, a well-intentioned Toronto dealer opted not to give a customer another travel first-aid kit but instead an expensive corkscrew set embossed with the Volvo name on the lid. The unquestioned leader in automotive safety associating with drinking? This decision was definitely not consistent with the established safety positioning.

Today, brands with strong positions are more important than ever as buyers face hyperchoice and wade through hyper-messaging across a growing number of information-delivery platforms. In self-defence, consumers and business-to-business buyers pick the brands they know to simplify their decisions and their lives. So, being "their" brand has never been more rewarding. However, if a brand changes what it says, how it looks or how it behaves, its loyal customers might begin to wonder whether the offering is the same. That might lead them to reopen their decision process to include other sellers all over again. If you do that, you'll have stopped making the buying decision easy for them and reintroduced all your competitors.

How can a company keep old friends and new friends in check and maintain its position?

It's the job of the CEO-come-CBO (Chief Brand Officer) to set the "brand foundation," a collection of filters that helps ensure that everybody makes decisions that maintain brand consistency. In 30 years of being associated with building brands, I know that old and new friends alike think they can make a change because they believe that previous decisions were arbitrary in the first place. With a brand foundation in place, all decision-makers can better understand what the brand stands for and how that will be communicated. Grounded by this foundation, their decisions will be less affected by personal preferences and will become increasingly consistent.

A brand foundation has the following elements:

- Core purpose: why this company exists in the first place;
- Vision: where this firm is going and how we'll know when we get there;

- Mission: what are the things we do every day to achieve our vision;
- Values: who we are and what our principles are;
- Position: how we differ from our competitors;
- Positioning: how we then say that we differ;
- Character: how we act and our tone of voice.

The core purpose and vision are set by the CBO, and together they will drive the foundation. The mission is then created by the team to accomplish the CBO's vision. Values are a short collection of words that authentically capture your principles — the things you won't compromise. The position is an offering in the marketplace that sets you apart (for Volvo, it's safety), and the positioning is how you say it over and over (for Volvo, it's "For Life"). Finally, character is the one that is most often missed. It's the piece that dictates whether the firm consistently communicates with humour or seriousness, and whether its tone is friendly or authoritative.

Building the brand foundation with the internal team helps get it right, ensuring authenticity. The process itself helps create ownership and buy-in from the various groups within a company. The outcome is a foundation that you and your employees can stand on when making decisions — whether about the fit of new recruits, the language on your website or sponsorship opportunities for the company. Shared and talk about by people at all ranks of your company, the brand foundation can help keep everyone on the same page.

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