



ted matthews brand coach

He'd make the boss a brand booster

A company's brand is too important for the marketing department, says this 'man on a mission'

By Justin Smallbridge

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Ted Matthews is a zealot. In a realm where a kind of cool distance is the default demeanor, Mr. Matthews is a true believer, work-ing to imbue clients with his fervour. After 28 years in marketing communications, his business card describes him as a branding coach, but he's more like a missionary.

"I'm on a mission to wrestle the brand away from the marketing department and give it back to the CEO, where it belongs," he said. "A brand has to be consistent to mean anything. But the whole marketing industry has been concocted to come up with something new every day — something that's never been seen before. Great brands have been built by companies that stay consistent."

During the 1980s, the average CEO's tenure at the top was about 10 years. Before that, a CEO usually ran a company for his or her entire working life. Today, a CEO's term in charge of a company is about three years. And each new CEO wants to make a mark. That means changing personnel and just about everything else on arriving. Too often, that includes the brand and the equity it carries.

"If the number one thing about a brand is consistency, then that is being lost with the change of people who believe they have to make their mark," Mr. Matthews said.

He said he finds few companies truly understand what "brand" means. They think it's the logo or the marketing message articulated in the company's advertising. Only the marketing department considers the brand, usually when ordered to redefine it to conform with a new CEO's vision. The only unwavering goal



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marketers are left with is winning awards. The ads they make wow their peers, but often do nothing for the brand.

That's why the religious metaphor makes sense. Mr. Matthews says a brand should be a set of principles and beliefs articulated through everything the company does. The articles of faith that define any religion don't change. Adherents express those beliefs by applying them in the way they live. Brands should work the same way. Strong brands — Mr. Matthews cited Sleeman Breweries and the Maytag Company as examples — are instantly understood by consumers as “meaning” a particular thing; Sleeman means preindustrial care and quality; Maytag means dependability. Advertising should reinforce a brand's meaning. If there's no brand, the advertising and marketing people have to come up with one. Too often, that can mean coming up with a hastily concocted brand that will match the advertising. Wrong, Mr. Matthews said.

“Take Air Canada rolling out Tango and Jazz; there's nothing there to make them brands. That only confuses my picture of what Air Canada is, and tells me that Air Canada is too expensive. Compare that with WestJet, where flying cheap is their core competency: low price, no frills, as-good-as-you--need-it airline.”

He aims to convert the CEO of any company that hires him — outfits like Oxford Properties. “I work to turn the CEO into a chief branding officer. That's the only way it can work: the person at the top has to believe in the idea and be able to articulate the brand throughout the company.” And that company wide understanding and expression is a key element of the all-important consistency brands need to thrive.

Bev Tudhope co-chief executive of Interbrand Tudhope, which helps companies understand and practise branding, agrees. “No brand strategy will succeed without the support of the CEO. He has to be firmly behind it and seen to be a champion both internally and externally.”

David Moore, managing partner at advertising agency Leo Burnett Canada, shares Mr. Matthews' understanding of the importance of branding. “Our whole approach is now based on something called the Brand Belief System, where we talk about the strength of brand. The company really doesn't own the brand. Consumers own the brand; brand equity is the collective belief by consumers of what that brand stands for.” The strongest brands embody the personalities of their entrepreneurial

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originators, like Virgin's Richard Branson, Starbucks' Howard Schultz, and Nike's Phil Knight.

Mr. Moore said branding has never been more important, since it's increasingly all a company's got. "Today you're seeing stronger brands than you have ever seen in history. Thirty years ago, Procter and Gamble could say, 'Tide now has enzymes.' They could live on that for five, 10, 15 years. Now, any product differentiation disappears in months. The concept of what your brand stands for becomes far more important."

While relatively few firms truly understand and practice branding, more are coming into the fold. "I'm getting a lot of head slapping," Mr. Matthews said of the response from clients. "'Of course. I get it; I see it.' It's a fundamental change in the way business is being done."

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