

instinct™

Leading and inspiring all those who touch the enterprise
to understand, embrace and enhance the power of your brand.

Another SARS death - This one self-inflicted.

No sooner than the world of commerce has the veil of war lifted and it appears that we can get back to business, SARS arrives on the scene and drives everyone underground. Airplanes fly empty, hotels struggle with huge vacancies and restaurants go hungry.

In a move similar to fast food outlets in the UK with the outbreak of mad cow disease, Mandarin Restaurants – a successful family buffet chain with 14 locations in southern Ontario – bought radio time to tell consumers of their anti-SARS measures.

“Since 1979,” they begin, “we have been committed to practicing the highest standards of health and safety. Now, during the current health situation, we are taking the following additional measures: no employee who has been to Asia in the past two weeks, visited a hospital, been exposed to a SARS patient or have the symptoms themselves will be permitted in the restaurant.”

Ouch. Too much information!

Building a Brand is a process [it's taken 23 years to build this one] – losing a Brand is an event... and for Mandarin, this could be it. The radio message – and web disclaimer - is introducing a whole new category of information to its customers.



Now more than ever is the time to tell the reassuring, heartfelt story of everything that customers know and love about the brand. Advertising, as usual, with a consistent, familiar tone will be reassuring, indicating a normalcy, a sense that everything is fine.

SARS will pass – as the WHO lifts the travel advisory on the city – and Mandarin shouldn't be causing its customers to think of whether it is safe to go out for dinner. A brand is what people think of you, it's a short form that speeds the decision-making process. You must keep that message consistent if you want to retain the brand equity you've worked for years to build.

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Granted many restaurants have struggled during this difficult period, but acknowledging SARS may be more damaging to the Mandarin brand in the long-term than the incremental business it may have generated during the crisis.

What would brand coach suggest?

Advertise. Run the same ads. Keep running them. Create a family promotion based on spring's arrival after a long winter. Hang colourful banners out in front of your locations to create an air of excitement and the message that something fun is going on inside. Feature the fresh [read: healthy] vegetable dishes that Mandarin is famous for. Call Hertz and rent a few more cars to fill the lot.

Donate and deliver food to all the health care workers and volunteers working all over the city, cover it in PR.

Keep Mel Lastman the hell away.