



What's in a brand?

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Mention branding in any circle of communication professionals and be prepared for that knowing look that says, "Yeah. I completely get it." Not so fast! Strategic communication experts aren't necessarily branding experts.

Branding has typically been the domain of marketing professionals and to a lesser degree, advertising agencies. It's a discipline that falls into that elusive grey area between marketing and communication, perfectly suited for a hybrid professional with a foot in both camps. Strategic branding will be one of the main beneficiaries of the rapidly emerging trend toward convergence of the two professions.

Repositioning a brand isn't simply turning the design team loose with words and colours. It's broader, deeper and much more complex than a visual identity. Business Insider looked at rebranding disasters among well-known brands. There are plenty of lessons to be learned about straying too far away from well-known names and visual identities.

The article "[10 Major Rebranding Disasters and What You Should Learn From Them](#)" nicely sums up the scope of a re-branding program: "A successful rebranding involves overhauling a company's goals, message, and culture -- not just changing a name or a logo. Also, messing with a classic is, more often than not, a bad idea."

Yet, in some circles branding is carelessly tossed about as though it has nothing to do with strategic advantage and everything to do with changing a logo. Simply changing a logo doesn't make an organization different today than it was yesterday. Brands are much deeper than a new logo, a tag line or even a positioning statement.

Scott Cook is the founder of Intuit, a multi-billion dollar business with over 10,000 employees that sells QuickBooks, TurboTax and Quicken. Cook is not only very successful; he's a visionary when it comes to product development and brand management. His take on branding? "[A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is — it is what consumers tell each other it is.](#)"

Advertising agencies don't create brands. People do.

Designers don't create brands. They create visual identities.

In short, customers and potential customers create brands based on their perception of value. Best practice organizations grow their brand and all of its characteristics, attributes and values from the outside in and from the inside out.

Seeing the organisation from the outside in

In the world of branding, the best and the brightest see their business and its offerings through the eyes of their customers or members and potential customers. That means research

and plenty of it. Reaching existing customers is often easier than exploring the unknown. Yet, if an organization intent on rebranding only sees itself in a mirror, it remains insular and limits the potential for growth by not paying attention to diverse needs and points of view.

Then there's competitive benchmarking. Any organization that wants to launch a new brand had better study what the competition is up to and fully understand what it takes to move ahead.

Brand architects focusing their research only on a handful of existing customers ignore the need for this vital research at the peril of the organization. Without due diligence to gather, analyze and apply all the research to decision-making any quest to reinvent the brand in meaningful and relevant ways will be stymied.

Every brand exists in the mind of its audience – customers and potential customers. One by one, they decide whether an organisation is ethical or unethical, responsive or rude, progressive or conservative, caring or cold, authentic or fake. Their collective perception determines whether it is dynamic or boring, honest or deceitful, approachable or closed, and so on.

We live in a world of citizen journalism where it matters less what the organisation wants its audiences to believe and more what people actually do believe. People form opinions based on their experience and interaction. Every touch point is a moment of truth, and actions that are misaligned with what an organization claims it stands for are at risk in the court of public opinion.

The customer value proposition

The backbone of a healthy brand is the customer value proposition, sometimes called the brand promise. A customer value proposition is the publicly declared commitment that an organisation makes to its customers and stakeholders.

The value proposition is not a positioning line or a slogan. A positioning line defines unique advantages against those of the competition and explains why this difference matters. A slogan supports a specific marketing campaign. A value proposition guides the strategy, decisions and behaviours of an organization at every turn. It clearly states what the organization promises

to deliver to its customers, and the organization must deliver every time through every action, every business decision and every encounter at every level.

Customers and potential customers, members and potential members, employees and potential employees, stakeholders, the business community and even the competition weigh the integrity of an organisation against its commitment to deliver on its promise to customers. Organisations that have yet to define or communicate their value proposition are missing the heart of the brand that governs all decision-making.

Seth Godin, the author of 18 international best-selling books, an entrepreneur and a highly sought-after speaker and teacher says, "[Making promises and keeping them is a great way to build a brand.](#)" Godin is a guru of everything branding, leadership and change. In 2013 he was inducted into the Direct Marketing Hall of Fame.

Looking from the inside out

Organisations with strong brands live their values in every action, deed and decision. As sure as the customer value proposition is the backbone of the brand, organisational values are the foundation defining the code of conduct for how everyone from senior to junior ranks interacts with its stakeholders. Everyone must walk the talk whether they are senior leaders, managers, employees or volunteers – not just when it's convenient but all the time. With every action everyone in an organisation is either constructing or deconstructing the brand.

Values are not what an organisation does. They don't describe the desired position in the marketplace. They don't describe what the organisation wants to be. They don't pronounce attributes. They describe how an organisation behaves and what it stands for today. These values cannot be compromised or the brand, reputation and the organisation will suffer.

Repositioning a brand usually means organisational change, and that's a whole other story. Those that tackle re-branding without managing change from the inside will eventually implode from the outside in. A brand without substance demonstrated in thought, action and deed runs the risk of being seen as false, which quickly becomes obvious to those who come in contact with the organisation.

Everything the organisation does and everything it chooses not to do, communicates the value and character of the brand. The marketplace is merciless and holds organisations to account for delivering on their promises among other qualities that demonstrate integrity and good corporate citizenship.

to consider what the customer wants, what the competition is doing, what the employees believe and whether they are on board, what commitments they are prepared to make and what behaviours need to change before a public announcement that the brand has been revitalized.

Simply stated actions speak louder than words

It's how phone conversations and emails are handled. It's the way that business meetings are conducted. It's how the organisation treats people and whether they are truly customer-centric and committed to protecting their greatest asset or whether they are only paying lip service to the value proposition. Everything sends a message about the brand. If an organisation doesn't change its behaviour from the inside out to meet the highest expectations of its customers and stakeholders everything else is academic. The brand will not be able to stand against public scrutiny, and in the end the cost of losing loyal customers and members brings both financial loss and reputation damage. An authentic brand reflects the needs, expectations, hope and dreams of its customers and prospective customers. It reflects the values it stands for each and every time at every touch point and every opportunity. It sees every encounter with a customer or member as a moment of truth, and builds reputation one customer at a time.

From Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, "[Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room.](#)" So, long before the design team is called to refresh a logo, organisations considering brand repositioning would do well



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Claire Watson consults to global, provincial and national companies on their communication needs. Her expertise encompasses research and measurement, internal and change communication, branding, marketing, public and community relations, advocacy and corporate social responsibility. She has taught extension classes for the University of Regina and developed unique training courses for the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence. She holds 33 international and 150+ national and provincial Awards of Excellence. In addition, she has received a Lifetime Achievement Award from IABC Regina, Master Communicator designation from IABC Canada and the IABC Chairman's Award for leadership in the profession.