Creating a branding culture

Jim Gregory, CoreBrand, argues that the corporate brand needs its own, considerable, share of the overall marketing communications budget

YOUR CORPORATE BRAND is your company's most valuable long-term financial investment and should be treated with the same constant attention and scrutiny as any other valuable asset.

All too often, senior management invests a tremendous amount of effort to develop a distinctive brand strategy, and then believes that their work is done. I have been helping senior executives build their brands for more than 25 years, and I can tell you that once the CEO has signed off on the brand strategy, their work has just begun.

At this stage your brand is like a child, new to the world and full of promise, but also in need of constant care and guidance. The most important thing a company has to do over time is to ensure that the experiences its audiences will get from the company will be consistent with the brand strategy. All brands are different, but for any company to confront the brand challenge successfully, there must be a well thought out and well-executed brand platform.

Managing your brand internally

Ensuring that everyone in your company, from the CEO to the people working in the mailroom, understand and live your company's brand is no easy task. Fortunately, there are a variety of tools that can help make this task easier. But, before a company can successfully implement an effective brand strategy, there must first be clear lines of communication.

The definition of a healthy branding culture is the ability for a company to communicate the brand message from the top down and for feedback to be communicated from the bottom up; in other words, effective lines of communication. First, the CEO must be on board: without their support the effort is over before it has begun. Also, there must be an agreed-upon brand manager in the company. If this person is not the CEO then they need to have the CEO's ear. Lastly, the C suite needs to realise that their employees are the most important part of the company's branding effort: they *are* the company's brand.

Once a brand message has been established, and leadership is in place, a company can begin the ongoing process of internal brand education by developing a digital asset management programme: a brand centre. A brand centre should be an integral part of the company's intranet which educates users about the company's brand, contains guidelines and approved materials from a centrally controlled point and guides employees through brand-related decisions. This is important because in today's marketplace almost every decision is a brand-related decision.

When creating a brand centre you need to keep in mind who will be using it and what resources need to be available to manage and maintain the brand centre. Getting ideas from successful brand centres is a good place to start, but remember, there is no single turnkey solution to every company's communications management challenges.

Projecting your brand externally

Once the CEO and brand manager have taken charge and employees are consistently updating themselves on your brand message through your brand centre, you can begin to project your brand message to your external audiences. When communicating your message externally you must be clear, you must be concise and you must be consistent. It is important to communicate your message consistently across all available touchpoints. We now know that the full benefits of corporate communications continue to grow in value years after the initial investment.

> This brand promise should be visible in the company's product brands, in the company's stores or offices, on the company's websites, on the company's anything!'

Consistently measuring your brand is essential to maintain an accurate picture of where you stand relative to your peer group and industry. A company that does not know where it stands will find it impossible to get where it wants to go. Annual measures are simply not sufficient: meetings with the C-suite often turn into educational lessons. Quarterly measures are needed to benchmark, track progress and assess ROI. These measures, commonly called dashboard measures, do no one any good sitting on a shelf; they must be consulted on every decision related to the brand in an effort to make all brand decisions based on quantitative data. Negative data must be reviewed along with the positive data: in the long run, this will strengthen your organisation by increasing its emphasis on fact-based decision-making.

When Ciba Specialty Chemicals Inc. was spun off from Novartis International AG (following the merger of the life science operations of Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz to form Novartis), it created a new company dedicated to creating and selling speciality chemicals for business-to-business customers.

CoreBrand helped Ciba develop a brand platform that is now the cornerstone of the company's branding strategy. The platform defines what Ciba does, who the company is and how it behaves. There are three primary components to the platform: the corporate brand promise; the brand personality; and the brand attributes. The essence of the brand is the promise: the promise articulates the emotional heart of the brand. The key to the brand promise is not about what a company makes: it should be about what it makes possible. Ciba defined this as 'delivering inspiring effects'.

Ciba is a great example of the success that can be attained with external audiences once clear lines of communication

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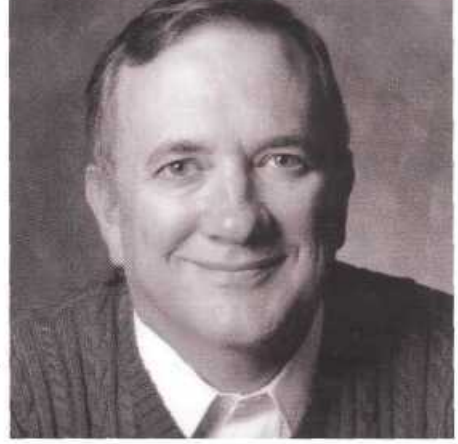


and a C-suite that understands the importance of the brand take root in an organisation.

Figure i shows the performance of a few companies who have been successful at sustaining a branding culture. Look at the advantage it gives them over the average brand performance for their respective industries.

The next step: licensing and co-branding

Licensing and co-branding partnerships with brands that complement your own can enhance your branding culture by creating more avenues of expression, and deliver returns to your bottom line. Additionally, these initiatives can increase the long-term value of your brand. Opportunities to extend your brand in this way are constantly changing and thus must be continually evaluated. Once a favourable opportunity is found, you must ensure that an effective strategy is put in place that clearly describes your target categories.

It is important to remember that not every next step that appears is one you should take. Licensing and co-branding moves that are not extensively scrutinised can do great damage to your company's brand. In addition to doing damage to your brand, you can also do damage to your cash flow. Beware of partnership initiatives that are built upon free offers that cannibalise your company's core business rather than drive a recurring and sustainable stream of revenue.

What is true for creating a brand message and effectively communicating that message to your external audiences is also true for licensing and co-branding: quantitative research is essential before any licensing or co-brand project can be implemented. Qualitative research (focus groups) is useful but does not provide you with the information you need to make such a large decision in the life of your brand. For this decision, only consistent quantitative research will do.

For millions of US fans, National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing represents the ultimate weekend experience, but NASCAR is also a business. To achieve its business goals, NASCAR leveraged its hugely popular brand to develop aftermarket and regional brands. In this process, NASCAR was able not only to create new revenue steams through the development of sub-brands but also to enhance the NASCAR brand by associating it with product performance, giving this growing brand the space it needs to create even more shareholder value.

Although licensing and co-branding are often complex processes that require an experienced brand manager, there is a very simple question that can usually tell you right away if the opportunity you are considering is a good one. Ask yourself, 'Are the two brand messages compatible in a way that strengthens your position in the minds of your customers?' If the answer is yes, then the opportunity should be researched further.

The recurring theme: consistency

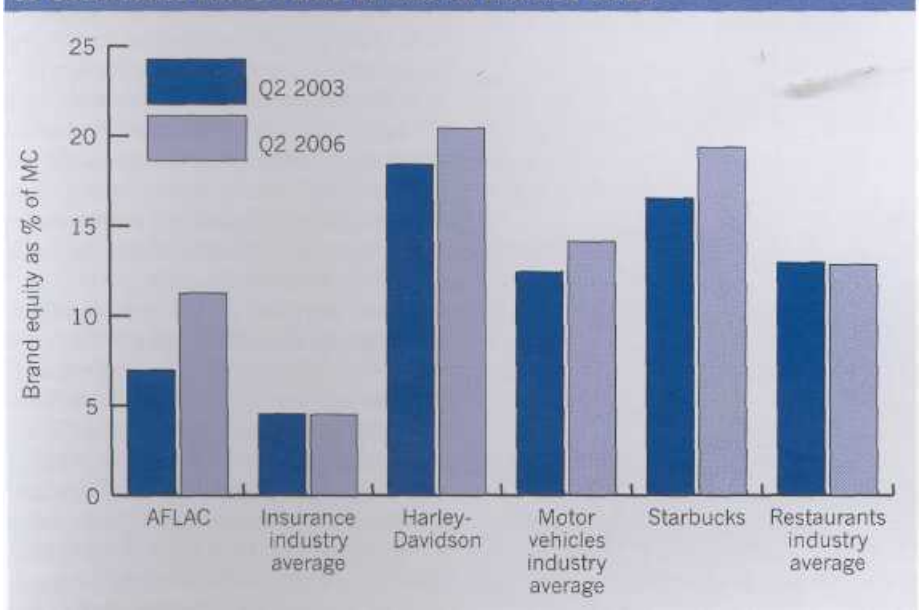
Whether your company sells to business, to government or to consumers, the message behind your corporate brand is of critical importance. This brand promise should be visible in the company's product brands, in the company's stores or offices, on the company's websites, on the company's anything! To maintain the health and vitality of your corporate brand (and to enhance its contribution to your bottom line) requires consistency in many different pursuits, but here are the three big ones.

1. *Quantitative measurements* must be used, and used consistently.
2. *Strategy* must be followed, and although revising your strategy is necessary to maintain an effective brand presence, your strategy must always be consistent with your brand message, or your company is going nowhere fast.
3. *Communication* must be consistent across all touchpoints; you need to make sure you are always telling people who you are and what you stand for.

If each one of these efforts supports the other, than you are already building an effective and sustainable branding culture. •

FIGURE 1

Strong brand cultures have enabled these corporate brands to contribute more value to overall market value



More on corporate branding at www.WARC.com

Fonte: Admap, n. 10, p. 54-55, nov. 2006.