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Define Your Brand and Sharpen Your Competitive Edge

Sep 8, 2009 4:45 PM, By Gregory J. Pollack

In today's world of ongoing financial turmoil, consumers are searching for—and demanding—a level of trust. For smart marketers and senior executives, this spells opportunity.

As we all know, a "brand" by definition is a promise that you can trust. And re-building trust through your brand is the secret to success.

Today, customers want and demand more. They want to know not only what they are getting, but why they should want or need it. They want to know how a product is different from the competition, and why they should trust that a brand will bring about their desired results. Brands need to stay current, and be more than simply just a product.

One strategic response to help companies and brands move forward is to dust off and refine their positioning statements and see if they really represent what the organization stands for today.

The original intent of a brand positioning statement is essentially to highlight a clear overarching message. It should include what your company stands for and your brand's point of differentiation, as well as positioning in the marketplace and overall industry. The statement needs to be simple, clear, concise, understandable and all-encompassing. It should be something *everyone*—management, employees, customers, manufacturing and vendors—can rally around.

To get to the core of your brand's positioning, you need to consider your brand's platforms, the three to five key pillars that represent the cornerstones of the brand's products and services. Identifying these can allow marketers and senior management to look at new channels of distribution, new products, and new ways of conducting business – all with the end goal of attracting and retaining new customers.

Identifying these platforms can help companies develop specific marketing program ideas; solve a current problem or challenge; respond directly to competitive growth and expansion; invigorate the existing brands and products; search for new channels of distribution; identify new growth opportunities; and respond to realistic market,

industry and customer demands including both trade, retail and consumer.

To create brand platforms, you should look at the history of the company and its business units, as well as the industry and the competition.

Using this information will be critical in focusing in on key words and phrases that make up the business

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in which your company and brands compete. Some relevant and appropriate platforms could include quality, precision, durability, taste, performance and customer service.

Under each brand platform, there should be a series of phrases that support and describe each area. For instance, if your brand platform is "trust," this could include safety, quality, customer service, ease of use, ease of access, long-term brand equity, etc.

If your brand platform is "achievable," then some key expressions could include now-you-can, reaching all target audiences, price/value, competitive, etc. "Friendly" could perhaps be appropriate for a more service-oriented company and brand which could include supporting descriptors such as reachable, convenient, ease of use, approachable, family, engaging, etc.

However, the magic is that when all of these words and phrases are used in the right combination they unlock an ownable, sustainable, leverageable and extendable series of ideas unique only to your company and brand groups. And these platforms can then be used to ensure that the company and brand groups remain on track in business, can develop new products and services for new and emerging markets, identify new usage occasions for existing brands and products, as well as open new channels of distribution.

The rationale for creating brand platforms should include:

- Reaching varied target audiences
- Defining usage occasions
- Broadening category
- Building the customer base
- Providing relevancy for management, affiliates and agencies
- Delivering strategic outline for integrated marketing efforts
- Ensuring consistency to brand positioning

Ideally, all of this would allow each platform to focus on different target audiences, with different messaging and marketing programs. In the earlier examples, clearly "trust" as a platform would reach a specific target audience and user group for your company and brand, while "achievable" would set up a different set of criteria in how to reach a more "price/value-driven" target audience and user group.

As an example, our company, PBM Marketing Solutions, has been involved with Virgin Charter, a division of the Virgin Companies and an online marketplace for private jet charter travel.

While the "Virgin" name is recognized as a worldwide brand and innovator in a number of businesses globally, Virgin Charter specifically still needed not only to create an ownable position within the marketplace, but also to differentiate itself from the competition. A plan was developed to focus on the brand platforms of simple, trust, empowered, fresh and attainable, targeting specific audiences and user groups with clear goals.

As one example, "empowered" equated to control, individualized, personalized, in-charge, choice, ownable, transparent, and on-demand; while "fresh" showcased fun, innovative, cool, new, refreshing, friendly, familiar and rewrite-the-rules.

In today's constantly fluctuating and changing economic climate, companies, brands, and businesses have a tremendous opportunity to stand up, take a leadership role in their industries and marketplace and clearly explain to customers "Why Buy Me." A transparent and clearly defined answer is what will breed success and long-term sustainability in the marketplace.

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