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PERSPECTIVES

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Seven golden rules of brand-building

back to basics

BY TIM MORAWETZ



Having spent many summers at a boy's camp where each day began with a brief morning talk that imparted some wise words about life, it seems to me that many of these familiar life-lessons are equally relevant to the challenges of building brands and growing businesses.

CREDIBILITY

1. Keep your word.

At its core, a brand is a promise. Failing to deliver on the expectations your brand has created in the minds of consumers is really a form of lying. While we can usually forgive one or two slip-ups, repeatedly breaking your word will cause you to lose customers – just as we tend to stop being friends with people we can't trust.

2. Talk is cheap.

The buying public has become sufficiently jaded by product and service claims that just talking about why you're better simply isn't enough. To attract new customers and cement the loyalty of current customers, you need to go out of your way to demonstrate how you're better, whether through sampling, free trial offers, open houses, customer testimonials and the like. Some examples of this rule in action include the 360-degree online tours of homes now offered by some realtors, and the new "overnight test drive" offered by General Motors of Canada.

3. Be judged by the friends you keep.

The greatest brands – like the individuals we most respect – have clear and strongly held principles and values that guide their actions. Successful brands know what they stand for, and what type of public persona and "brand behaviour" reinforces their true essence.

Such brand values can guide a range of marketing decisions, from the type of charitable causes you support, to the types of establishments that distribute your product, to the integrity of the people who work inside your organization.

Remember, there are lots of different and legitimate values out there, so it's perfectly reasonable that a male-oriented beer brand exhibits rather different brand behaviour than, say, a luxury hotel company. (Molson's title sponsorship of the Molson Indy racing event clearly reaches a different target audience than Four Seasons' name sponsorship of the new opera house in Toronto, yet they both aim to reinforce the persona of their brand.)

Being seen in the right company also helps you gain from the other brand's credibility with its customer, and can even stimulate trial of your brand.

CONSISTENCY AND CLARITY

4. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

We all know the phrase: It takes 100 interactions to establish your reputation, but just one to break it. The same holds true with brand-building. Each of the many different ways consumers experience your brand – whether on the package, on the Web, on the phone, on TV, or out the window on their way to work – affects what they think of your brand and whether they're willing to buy from you. As a marketer, you can't afford to

have one aspect of your brand's overall presentation undo all the effort you've put into the other parts of your total offer.

5. Say what you mean. Then, mean what you say.

People want the straight goods. For example, does your firm really provide end-to-end customer service, or are you actually not so good in some parts of your offer?

Be focused: Trying to be all things to all people or making improbable claims rarely works. In the service business, most customers prefer to deal with the experts who are skilled with addressing specific problems, rather than dealing with a jack of all trades and a master of none.

The reality is, you're likely better off to clearly acknowledge your weak spots (or not go there at all), rather than having consumers learn about your weaknesses at their expense, and then bad-mouth you to all their friends (the undesirable form of viral marketing).

Having declared what you're good at, then make damn sure you deliver exactly what you promise – and ideally more, in order to surprise and delight consumers. ING Direct comes to mind as an organization that's built a very specific marketing platform, then stayed clearly within that brand promise even as it has expanded its range of products.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

6. Practice makes perfect.

We all know that failure is a great teacher (albeit hard on the ego). In striving to make your brand the best it can be, it's worth taking some carefully considered risks to explore how you can be even better.

Listen to what current customers are saying and test their ideas. Get your product in the hands of a new

customer segment. Try new combinations of ingredients. Explore new ways of packaging your product. Think about unconventional distribution channels. Try out a new pricing strategy. Have lunch with the salespeople who champion your product with the trade or consumers. Spend time listening to the talk at the warehouse loading dock.

It's hard to predict where the next big idea will come from unless you explore lots of different avenues. In all of this, it's best not make a big splash about your "improvements" until you've got all the wrinkles out. When you're ready, go ahead and share them with the world.

7. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

This is the real golden rule. For marketers who seek to influence their customers, it means respecting people's intelligence. Not wasting their time, but getting to the point of how your product can meet their needs (at whatever level of need they may have). It means giving something back to the communities in which you do business. It means being honest and fair – which doesn't mean you can't be passionate about winning.

Ultimately, the challenge of building a great brand and growing your business takes insight, intelligence, empathy and integrity. (And lots of hard work.) But the rewards of truly satisfying customers' needs makes it all worthwhile.

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