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The Purpose-Driven Brand is Key to 21st Century Success

By Alan Siegel

A convergence of forces — from economic disruption caused by radical new technologies, the impact of the global economy, a dangerous trend toward illegal and ill-advised corporate actions, growing crises of complexity, and a cacophony of communications — have combined to create the most challenging environment in which to structure branding programs.

Contrary to common practice, penetrating branding programs cannot be built on a flawed “outside-in” research approach in which customers tell the brand what it is doing wrong, but not how to develop a compelling solution. I prefer an “inside-out” approach, where the hard work of developing strategic brand building programs grows out of tapping the insights and talent within the organization.

Identity requires a clearly-defined purpose

Let’s begin at the beginning. An organization’s purpose is its reason for being in business, the calling company answers from the marketplace and the problems it seeks to address. Defining a succinct purpose creates a sense of coherence for employees and explains what your company stands for beyond making money. Purpose should be the driving force behind key strategic and investment decisions.

However, it is important to understand that purpose is not to be confused with in-vogue corporate responsibility programs. Finding and living by a purpose statement provides the framework for making decisions, fashioning value propositions, creating a coherent brand voice and fostering an inclusive culture.

Bold, Compelling Positioning

We are bombarded by obscurely clever, unintelligible tag lines masquerading as purpose-based positioning: “Life. Well Spent” -Sears; “The Power of &” -AT&T; “A Body for Every Body” -Victoria’s Secret. But what is required is a penetrating positioning that will engage employees to “live the brand” while providing a foundation on which to build integrated marketing communications programs that differentiate your brand from its competitors.

Positioning provides the foundation to ensure that a branding program rings true with its stakeholders, beginning with employees. The first step requires validation research to check that it is clear (audiences understand your message), credible (believable, not over-promising) and relevant (generating supportive behavior from your stakeholders).

Defining, Executing Brand Voice

Many of the branding programs I have studied incorporate the definition of the brand voice with four or five predictable words — human, empathetic, courageous, etc., along with short definitions. However, the prototype materials that accompany the words rarely reflect the brand voice. This disconnect between voice and purpose highlights one of the weakest points in modern branding programs and undermines their success.

In building a brand voice, clarity is critical. A true brand voice is authentic and honest. It rises above the noise by projecting the distinctive corporate personality. Once achieved, you then need a training program to teach the organization how to use its voice, starting with corporate leadership and cascading through every layer of the organization. Since the advent of the Internet and the rise of social media, everyone projects the company’s voice, not just those people who create organizational communications, and without guidance employees will fragment that voice, replacing it with their personal perspective.

Defining and living the brand culture is essential to the success of any 21st-century branding program. An inspired culture provides the underpinning for building branding programs with real impact. In

addition to traditional performance indicators, when evaluating brand impact, corporations should measure how their culture supports the brand purpose.

Employees will actively support brands when they see the organization has a purpose, beyond ROI, and has meaning and values they can embrace and share. Surely, people want to be part of a winning team, and they will enrich the brand when they are made to feel important while achieving personal and professional growth, and have fun doing it.

Just look at the headlines of newspapers' business sections, which are rife with stories of corruption, conspiracy, duplicity, and exclusion. In such a global business environment, one cannot overestimate the importance of instilling a passionate, uplifting spirit with creativity at the core of one's brand identity. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere."