

Branding – Do Your Customers Really Know What You Do?

If industry professionals were asked to describe your industry in single word, many would respond with the word “change.” Mergers and acquisitions, new technologies, products and services, dramatically shortened development cycles, Internet access to information and evolving marketplace needs are among the many factors that have caused tremendous changes in almost all industries in the past few years. Product differentiation is difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Chances are very good that your company offers a lot more in the way of products, services and solutions than you did just a few years ago. Your company’s core competencies and capabilities are probably not what they were a few years ago. Your key messages and “brand” have also evolved. In other words, a great number of things have changed dramatically in the past few years, both within your marketplace and within your company.

As a result of these and other changes, many of your prospects and existing customers are dealing with outdated and therefore inaccurate information about your company’s capabilities and “brand.” Most cannot accurately describe all that you can currently do to help them succeed. To prove a point, ask yourself the following questions:

“If I surveyed our hundred best customers, how many would be able to accurately describe our current products, services or solutions?”

“How many could state our key messages?”

If the answer is less than 100%, you’re losing sales. If the customer perceives that you do A, B and C and they need A, C, D, E and F, you might not get considered.

Another way to prove the same point is to ask your sales representatives if they have ever had the following conversation:

Customer: “I just bought X from another company.”
Salesperson: “Why didn’t you order it from me?”
Customer: “I didn’t know you sold those.”

Not only is the sales opportunity lost, but the competitor has penetrated the account and will potentially jeopardize future business as well.

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Brands and Branding

It is often said that the “buyer’s perception is the seller’s reality.” Every verbal and visual interaction with prospects and customers is an excellent opportunity for you and your associates to influence the perceptions, attitudes and (buying) behavior of your target audience by conveying information about your company and “brand” that is updated and accurate.

What is a Brand?

Brands are important because it’s the buyer’s interpretation of a brand and its value that determines the final decision to choose one brand over another. According to InterBrand-Schechter (England), the value of a brand lies in the role that it plays for customers and/or consumers. What’s the real value?

Brands provide customers with a means of identifying a particular product or service as originating from a certain producer or supplier. This guarantee of origin provides a reassurance of quality and consistency and is the basis of a pact between supplier and customer. The strength of this pact determines the degree to which there is a guarantee that the customer will continue to buy from the supplier.

Brands also offer an opportunity to communicate with customers directly rather than having to rely on a middle man or distributor. They can offer a means of establishing a strong relationship with customers and therefore a stronger, more secure market demand for the branded product or service.

Key messages support, help define and are integral to a company’s brand. Your existing customers and prospects are bombarded with marketing messages from potential suppliers. To “stand out from the crowd,” and be remembered accurately, we suggest that you create marketing messages that are simple, clearly defined and easily remembered, and are consistent with how you want your company, products, services and solutions to be perceived and remembered. Convey your key marketing message in all of your visual and verbal interactions. Make sure that your staff understands and can articulate your messages so that they can clearly convey them to their prospects and customers. If your staff can’t articulate your messages, your marketplace won’t be able to do so either.

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Some companies have a different message for each product or service they sell. Prospects and customers can get confused when you send too many messages, or if your messages are not aligned with one another. Many companies are getting away from branding products (which can become obsolete) and are instead branding their company. A single message, or a “family” of a few messages, is easier to remember than diverse messages that are not tied together in one way or another. Your company’s “master brand” should serve as an “umbrella” for all of the diverse products, services and solutions you offer. The more consistent the message, and the more it is repeated, the greater the probability that prospects and customers will remember your company (and your unique value proposition and capabilities) as you want and need to be remembered.

Influencing Marketplace Perceptions

Step One

The first step is to identify the marketplaces’ “existing perception” – how your company, products, services, solutions, values, methodologies and brand are currently perceived. Ask employees, prospects, customers and strategic partners (informally or formally) to describe your company; their answers will tell you what they know and what they don’t know about your organization’s capabilities. Understanding what people are thinking and feeling will enable you to determine how to best reposition or “rebrand” your capabilities and unique competitive advantages to make sure that marketplace perceptions are updated and accurate.

Step Two

The next step (one of the hardest) is to determine the “desired perception” – how you want to be perceived. Ask yourself the following question to help you determine the desired perception. Think about your “master brand” and key messages – your image and how you want to be perceived in the eyes of the customer. A good way to determine the “desired perception” is to ask yourself “If the buying team was discussing our company and its capabilities, what would be the ideal words be if they described us as we want to be described?” The answer to these questions will help you pin down what your “master brand” and key messages should be.

Step Three

Next, it’s time to determine the marketing and sales strategy you’ll implement to close the gap between the “existing” and “desired” marketplace perceptions. Influencing and changing perceptions takes time. Don’t expect to change market-

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place perceptions overnight. Your strategy to build on positive perceptions, and change negative ones, must be well thought out and long-term. Strategize how your verbal and visual messages can neutralize negative perceptions, and build upon positive ones. Strategize how you will convey your key messages and unique competitive advantages (value proposition) on every interaction and through the visuals representations you create.

Step Four

Once you understand the existing perception, defined the desired perception, and created a strategy to ensure that the existing and desired perception are the same, it is time to implement your plan. Successful implementation is dependent, in large part, upon your ability to convey the elements of your brand identity frequently and consistently. Take the time to teach your sales and marketing personnel the importance of understanding, conveying and leveraging your brand. If your staff doesn't know or can't convey your key messages, they won't be able to articulate them. Periodically spend time to update your entire organization on new capabilities, products, services and key messages. Don't assume your employees understand everything you do. If your employees don't know and therefore can't articulate your messages, your marketplace probably won't understand all that you can do to help them succeed. The goal is to help your prospects and customers make purchase decisions and vendor selections with information that is updated and accurate.

Step Five

The final step is to track results to determine the effectiveness of your strategy. If you're being successful, continue with your plan. If not, adjust accordingly. Sometimes, the best plan and best strategy will not work. One way to measure and evaluate performance is with a pre- and post-survey technique which is often used to measure message, image, brand and/or awareness objectives if the audience has had the potential for being exposed to your messages, products or company prior to viewing your media. The pre-media survey conducted prior to the use of the media establishes a benchmark level of awareness before exposure to your visual. The post-media survey measures the success of your media in changing awareness, image and/or recall of the message.

Sales Conversion Surveys

This type of survey measures the dollar volume of sales resulting from leads generated by a campaign. They're usually conducted approximately two to nine

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months following the campaign depending upon the length of the buying cycles of your products and services. They also measure purchases from competitors, the degree of influence the campaign had on the purchases and the level of follow-up received from sales- people or representatives. Sales conversion surveys are an alternative for companies that cannot institute a lead-tracking system due to lack of management support, channel of distribution (i.e., sell exclusively through dealers or distributors), inability to get field sales to report back, etc. Whatever methodology you use, measuring and evaluating results will help you continuously improve your results.

In summary, every verbal and visual interaction with prospects and customers is an excellent opportunity to close the gap between the existing and desired marketplace perceptions of your company's capabilities. Clearly define your brand and teach your sales and marketing personnel how to convey, support and leverage it. Doing these things will: 1) ensure that marketplace perceptions are updated and accurate; 2) create sales opportunities; and 3) help you build brand recognition and loyalty.