

A white paper: *Moving your brand to the next level*

Overview

Sustainable brands will typically move through increasing levels of sophistication as their companies change, markets develop and opportunities arise. And while the core basis of the brand may remain essentially the same, the way in which it is expressed and experienced is likely to evolve. By paying attention to several key elements in brand development, brand managers and executive leadership can effectively move their brands and their companies to the next level of growth, profitability and competitiveness.

What baseball and branding have in common

Of all the professional sports in the U.S., baseball has the most elaborate player development system. Major league teams have four or five minor league affiliates at three or more competitive levels. Players hoping to make it to the majors have to move up through this system where at each stage it is successively more challenging to succeed, but, of course, the rewards are greater as well.

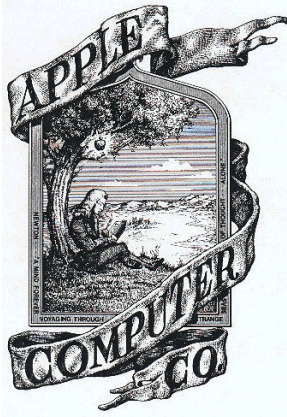
The same is true with brands. Growing companies have many reasons to want to move their brand to the next level. They may be seeking higher profitability, to expand geographically or to add to their product line. They may have acquired another firm that adds new dimensions to their products or services, or they could be looking to compete more directly with a big national brand.

Moving a brand to the next level can be as challenging as moving up in the minor leagues. The game moves a little faster. The details matter more and demand more concentration and knowledge. Weaknesses are more easily exploited by the competition. Aspiring players and brands alike have to learn, adapt and hone their skills. And if they don't, someone (or some brand) will likely take their place before long.

But by sharpening brand strategy and applying it to their marketing with better tools and increased sophistication, brands can reach the next level and continue to hit the ball out of the park.

Apple: From David to Goliath as a brand

From a two-person business to the world's most valuable company, Apple has gone about as far as a brand can go in a relatively short period of time. But often lost in their success story is that



Apple's brand has made two deliberate shifts in brand strategy that helped them sustain their tremendous growth.

The entire world is familiar with the iconic apple-shaped logo, but their first logo looked more like an elaborate woodcut image from the 18th century. Look carefully and you'll see that it does contain an apple, which is about to bonk Sir Isaac Newton on the head.

Playing the underdog hero

But, soon after Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak began to produce commercially viable computers, they switched to the now familiar apple shape with rainbow coloring, and began crafting a brand

which was clearly innovative, but also renegade and anti-establishment. Their brand strategy effectively positioned IBM and what would soon be known as the "PC" world as stodgy and regimented in contrast with the fresh, young, rebellious image of Apple Computer. The brand perhaps rang most true with the infamous "1984" commercial that appeared only once on a Super Bowl broadcast, yet caused an epic marketing sensation.



Fast forward through ups and downs and the rising success of their powerful Macintosh sub-brand, and Apple found themselves at another crossroads as a brand. Their co-founder, Steve Jobs, had returned to the company with a vision of how Apple's technology could apply far beyond the world of computers.



Changing the name and expanding the brand

Apple's new product concepts promised to revolutionize the world of music and communications, so in 2007, they moved their brand up again, this time dropping the word "computer" from their name and becoming simply Apple. The brand had branched out and reinvented the world of MP3 players and mobile phones, and followed with the personal tablet. The new brand modernized the apple icon without changing its shape, and moved to a much imitated clean, white look that can be seen in their packaging, advertising and now in their incredibly successful retail stores.

These stores, in fact, were a major step for the Apple brand because they allowed them to take full control of their brand experience at the retail level. But this transition also shifted Apple away from the renegade image toward one of a hip, premium experience. Apple recognized that their brand was no longer the underdog to much larger competitors and, instead, had become the establishment in several product categories. As market leaders, the Apple brand had deliberately evolved and grown to one with far broader appeal that matched the strategic changes their company undertook in everything from product development to retail strategy.



When is it time to expect more from your brand?

The need to move a brand forward can come from many directions. Here are a few we hear most frequently from our clients:

“We’re not recognized for how good we are.”

We frequently work with clients who have a great product and a compelling story to tell, but their current brand strategy has become outdated or poorly executed. One way to evaluate this is to create several brand concept statements that describe a new and improved version of your brand, and then test them with appropriate audiences through market research. Exercises like this are frequently eye-opening, and help discover what messages work and why. And, of course, vice versa.

“Our current brand must evolve or it will lose competitiveness.”

Markets can change rapidly, especially in the digital age where technical advantages disappear within months. High-profit businesses end up cannibalized by smaller, lower-overhead competitors, and are forced into changing their brand strategy. The direction is usually toward a higher value, more customized approach, or a broader product line that can be replenished as needed to compete. Shifting a brand like this can be doubly challenging because most brands want to keep the customers or clients they already have, while changing to an improved version that attracts new ones. Developing and testing strategies for a smooth evolution is a key part of succeeding with this transition.

“We’re missing opportunities.”

This problem often goes hand in hand with geographic expansion dreams. Your established markets know your brand well, but reaching out to another region with little or no familiarity feels like running into a brick wall. Your venerable brand that hasn't had to change in its current marketplace may seem dull or irrelevant to another market with less awareness and different competition. Moving to the next level here means bridging the gap between high awareness and no awareness with a brand that can appeal to both audiences.

The link between brand strategy and strategic planning

More and more companies are realizing the critical role that brand plays in their success as a business or organization. Look, for instance, at the effort that food retailers now put into crafting their own store brands to improve their appeal as they compete with national leaders. Understanding the role your current brand plays, and where it could evolve to, should be basic building blocks in the strategic planning process. Exploring brand strategy options can also have a catalytic effect on the overall business strategy decisions for a company looking to grow or remain strong.

“We’ve grown so much we don’t know who we are anymore.”

Growing by acquisition can have a nasty side effect of bringing together a set of brand cultures that don't mix well. Having one logo on your business cards doesn't necessarily solve this problem, especially if the acquired brands resist becoming part of the new whole. This can lead to fragmented perceptions and confusion among your customers. To move to the next level, companies with a clash of brands have to find ways to unify their overall message, or build the conflicting brands separately. Developing a simplified brand architecture that reduces confusion internally and externally can be one way of solving this problem.

“Our brand name is holding us back—it’s time for a change”

Countless businesses start out as niche brands that define themselves by a person's name, a geographic region or a product line focus. Doing so can give them instant credibility, but, over time, the name can seem limiting as the business grows beyond its original boundaries. Yet, changing a brand name can be a little like changing a child's name when he is six years old—there's a whole family of customers and others who like it just the way it is. Studying different naming strategies can help you decide on a new name, and whether to change it quickly or in stages.

Five Steps to a Better Brand

Strategic harmony—this means a company should match its message with its mission. A brand that claims to be the “premium choice,” but, in reality, sells on low price does not have strategic harmony. Likewise, a brand that specializes in high levels of service to a small clientele may have trouble delivering their brand experience to larger clients or distant markets. The Apple case history shows how their brand remained in harmony with their direction as a company while it grew, even when it meant dropping the term “computer” from their name.



Focus—the best brands are centered on a simple idea that defines their core. FedEx is reliable. BMW is high performance. Coke is life enjoyment. If you can't express your company's or organization's brand in one or two words, it's not focused enough. The good news? There's still room to improve your brand and its message.

Sophistication—better brands get the details right. Much like the baseball analogy in the introduction, moving to the next level means new levels of detail for precise use of brand visual and messages, and especially maintaining a consistent brand experience. Brands on the rise seek higher quality design and writing, pay closer attention to customer surveys and maintain higher quality standards for their products or services.

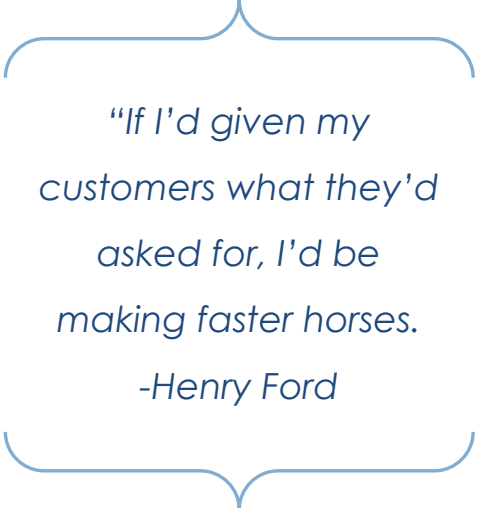
Control & consistency—this means having brand rules and the brand police to enforce them. In most cases, the bigger the brand, the bigger the brand standards manual will be. Graphic standards are the first step—proper use of colors, logo, typefaces and current graphics. But brand message and experience will have to be managed more closely to maintain a higher level of consistency.

Feedback & refinement—leading brands never stop collecting input on themselves from their employees, their customers and their prospects. Gathering regular feedback can help a brand maintain its strategies, or signal a need for fine-tuning or even major adjustments. Feedback of this type goes far beyond “How are we doing?” surveys and should include qualitative, as well as quantitative, approaches. Using the findings, brand managers can make incremental adjustments to their brand messages and brand experience that will help deliver their strategies more effectively.

Why brand research should be different from the typical customer survey

Henry was right; it's not as simple as asking people what they want. Good brand research helps companies find what their customers really need, and how to motivate them to want to buy it. One approach we use to get at genuine consumer attitudes when conducting market research is projective imaging. Projective imaging is a series of questioning techniques that forces participants to disconnect their "marketing radar" and discuss their opinions in an unfiltered way. It's an approach that often gives a clearer picture (and better branding insight) than conventional questioning alone can reveal.

The technique can be as simple as asking, "If this brand were a famous person, who would it be?" Participants in this kind of research generally don't have the time to translate their answers into highly considered answers and instead respond from the heart. The researcher can then look for patterns in the responses and ask follow-up questions. If many of the suggestions are of one gender or age group, or of a certain standing in society, many inferences can be drawn. The brand may be portrayed with these references as tired or vibrant, versatile or narrow, sensitive or aggressive. For brands looking to move to the next level, insights from this type of research can identify possibilities for refining their message, or problem perceptions that will need to be addressed.



*"If I'd given my
customers what they'd
asked for, I'd be
making faster horses.*

-Henry Ford

Our firm's use of projective imaging includes our proprietary BrandStorm™ process, which can be applied to outside and internal audiences equally well. For one client, an internal BrandStorm with their staff revealed some fascinating information. Initially, the name suggestions were identifying a pattern of a traditional, respectable brand with suggestions like Queen Elizabeth, Winston Churchill, William Penn and Martin Luther King. (Notice they are all deceased except for the elderly Queen.) Then came John Wayne and, the kicker, General Custer. "Why General Custer?" asked our session leader. "Because we ride into situations without enough information and get our heads shot off!" was the answer. This revelation helped us explore a hidden weakness of their brand and led to a frank discussion of how the brand and the organization could be improved and transitioned to its next phase.

Conclusion:

Like a baseball player trying to make it to the majors, growing brands must develop their skills and sophistication to move up to the next level. Maintaining strategic harmony between the brand and its company's strategic plan is the first of several steps to success. By developing new or expanded capabilities for brand insights, training and maintenance, growing brands can make the grade and reach new levels of performance.

Taylor Brand Group is a brand consulting firm that helps clients build, manage and rehabilitate their brands. We create ideas for our clients that reach into their customers' hearts and minds to express the essence of what their businesses are all about. These ideas range from designing a company's brand from the ground up using our Brand Blueprint™ process, to finding a better way to improve performance in a specific segment of their business.

To find out more about how we can help build your company's brand, contact Dave Taylor at 717-393-7343.