A white paper:
Rediscovering the power of your brand

Overview

For many companies the daily pace of doing business leads them away from the core values of their brand concept. But they can re-discover the power of their brand by identifying lost elements and determining whether it's best to return to the original concept or to adapt it to a changing marketplace.

Back to the Future

There was a time when it seemed so simple, so natural. Your brand flowed almost instinctively from marketing to product to customer service. Your customers loved it; they told other people about it. Your brand was second nature, easy, and entirely authentic. And then something happened, and it just wasn't the same anymore.

More likely, about 1,000 somethings happened. Product lines expanded, a big customer demanded a special solution. Where there was once a simple, intuitive way to handle problems, processes and polices became necessary. What happened was growth happened. Success happened. And ironically that was what was killing your brand.

The problem is not that your brand is lost. In many cases it's just been buried under years of neglect, brand extensions, web site add-ons, and new employees who may never have been properly trained on what your brand is about. (And what it isn't.)

As brands evolve they often go through periods where they lose focus, but in most cases, using the right tools, you can rediscover your brand and put it on a clear path for the future. Even major brands with corporate communications departments find themselves having to take a step back and rediscover. Here are a couple of recent examples:

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Starbucks returned to their core concept

For many years Starbucks was a small wholesale coffee trading company in Seattle. Then one day Howard Schultz, their CEO, took a trip to Italy. He was enchanted by the processes he saw in coffee and espresso bars in Milan. Branding expert Lewis Carbone describes it in his book "Clued In" this way, *"He registered the sights and sounds and flavors and smells of fresh ground coffee being artfully woven into an experience."* Schultz essentially imported the Italian coffee bar concept to the United States, built it up and then exported it to the world. Starbucks' growth was impressive. The brand grew rapidly, probably too rapidly, to more than 12,000 stores in over 30 countries. But even before the economic downturn in 2008, Starbucks had begun to lose sales. A brand that was built on a carefully crafted experience of making and sipping a luxurious cup of coffee started to get dinged by major competition from Dunkin Donuts and McDonald's McCafe concept.

When the downturn dragged Starbucks further into a malaise, their management took a hard look at what was happening to the brand and found they had lost their focus on being a different kind of coffee experience. Too many shops were lacking essential elements of the brand like a quiet place to relax and read a paper. The company made several moves to retrench and focus the brand, the most public of which (and arguably most brilliant) was closing all their stores for several hours at exactly the same time for a complete retraining of all Starbucks staff on the intricacies of preparing their special concoctions. After a trimming of non-performing locations, sales have begun to increase and new stores are opening around the world with a renewed focus on what makes Starbucks, well, Starbucks.

Cadillac adapted to a changing luxury sedan market

At the height of its brand power, Cadillac was not just the leading big car luxury car brand in the United States; its name had become jargon for describing any superior quality, as in "it's the Cadillac of…." The brand, of course, took a plunge in sales as high-end imported competition decimated their market share with better built, better performing, more efficient vehicles.

At the low point of their brand history, Cadillac was reduced to a unibody lookalike of its Buick and Oldsmobile siblings, with little more than headlight and taillight variations to distinguish it from more down-market models. Cadillac had lost touch with its brand, but their market was changing around them at a rapid rate. They no longer had the high-end market to themselves and were forced to look at what their brand could keep and what else was needed to compete.

What they found was that while luxury was still a viable part of their brand, big cars were no longer the standard of excellence. Styling and performance were becoming more important and brands like BMW, Mercedes and Acura (and later Lexus) were leading the way. To adapt, Cadillac introduced the CTS, a direct competitor to the BMW 5 Series and created a luxury version in the SUV category with the Escalade. Sales improved and the CTS is now their best-selling model.

Starbucks was able to retreat to their core brand position to find revitalization. Cadillac couldn't go home again, but kept its core brand value of luxury and eventually reacted to the changing marketplace. While there are many reasons for reviewing a brand with the hopes of returning to past success, here are several of the most common.

Three common reasons to consider reviewing your brand:

1. **New management:** We're often asked for help with brand issues when a long established owner or leader is turning the business over to a younger management team with some experience at the company. The new team wants to keep the core values of the company intact, but also wants to move forward and leave some traditions behind. "Who are we?" questions and "why-have-we-always-done-things-this-way" conversations are a sure sign of conflict that should be opened up and explored.

2. **Sales have developed a slow leak:** No one has the answer for why sales have slipped while your competition has held steady or even grown. Pricing and product features seem comparable, but your revenue is dropping for no apparent reason. Brand problems can be hard to spot amid web site traffic reports, six-month rolling revenue averages, and quarterly department summaries. Rediscovering the power of your brand usually means exploring intangibles such as brand experience, loyalty, and relevance.

3. **The business is moving up to the next level**: Many times the leadership of companies sees that their future growth and profits will require enhancements to their brand. A local company may be ready to become regional, or a regional company make the jump to a national footprint. With new competition and a bigger stage, an enhanced brand is essential.

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Start by asking the wrong questions

OK, we don't really mean ask the wrong questions. But we do suggest asking questions that are unexpected and can lead to more honest assessments. For example, if someone asks you, "Why do you love your spouse?" your answers are likely to be relatively abstract and reveal little. But if someone says, "tell me a story where your spouse was the hero," then you are far more likely to reveal truer emotions and insights into your relationship.

Exploring brands is like that. We are strong advocates of using projective research techniques to get at more authentic answers than typical straightforward questions are likely to reveal. Projective techniques are a way around the barriers that people put up around themselves where they want to show that they are smart, impervious to marketing, and make practical, fact-based decisions about their purchases.

One of our most effective approaches for getting beyond stock or politically correct answers is a product we call the BrandStorm™ process. The concept works with both internal and external audiences and often uncovers new perspectives that conventional questioning does not. There are many ways of using projective techniques. One example is portraying an entire marketplace as an extended family and asking the group to describe which companies are which family members with some detail about what their personalities are like, what cars they drive, how other family members feel about them. Because these techniques place the participants in a fun, but unfamiliar environment, they tend to drop their guard and assign honest feelings to the characters.

A favorite question we often use to begin internal staff discussion is asking the participants to come to the meeting prepared to answer the following question: "If your company was a famous person, who would it be?" The collective answers are without fail quite revealing.

One company we worked with recently named the following people at the beginning of the BrandStorm session:

- Eli Manning (NFL quarterback)
- Janet Jackson (Singer/musical artist)
- Jim Tressel (Ohio State football coach)
- Phil Mickelson (Pro golfer)
- Omar Bradley (World War II general)

We were immediately struck by the similarity of all five of the suggestions, since each of these people were considered in some way to be number two in their profession. (Eli laboring in the shadow of Peyton, Janet in the shadow of Michael, Jim Tressel lost two out of three championship games, Phil just behind Tiger, and even Omar Bradley who was a leading general in World War II, but second-in-command to Dwight Eisenhower.) Despite the age range of participants in this group, they had revealed a prevailing sense of being number two in their field, an emotional feeling they had never even realized on their own, much less admitted to us in our assessment process. As you might imagine, this led to a very frank discussion about the company's strengths and weaknesses from a new perspective.

Two directions: Get back to the core idea of the brand. Or adapt it to a changing marketplace.

As companies look to re-discover their brand they are typically faced with two choices: Change *back* to the brand that was successful in the past, or accept that some fundamental elements of the brand or the marketplace means there is a need to change *forward*. The earlier case histories of Starbucks and Cadillac illustrate the two examples. Starbucks saw how they had wandered from their core brand concept and returned to it. Cadillac saw how the luxury car market had changed. There was no way they could return to the days of big-finned boat-like cars or the one-size fits all car lines with limited customization. Their market had changed enough that their products and brands had to change with them. Still, they were able to retain the core of their brand, which was luxury.

Change back or forward? Some typical questions to ask:

- **Is your internal brand culture intact or at least recoverable?—**Many brands are simply not well communicated. Their culture is strong, the brand experience positive.
- **Has your marketplace evolved away from some or most of the appeals of your brand?** Benchmark research can be handy here, but if it doesn't exist, a study of customers and non-customers can be helpful. Good research can determine if customers and prospects have lost interest in your key point of difference, or if it is still relevant when positioned in new or different ways.
- **Can your most loyal customers describe the value of your brand in clear and simple terms?** Try asking them for a one or two word description of your brand. What does it mean to them? If the answers are inconsistent or basic like "good value," the brand may need to evolve.
- **If you are facing declining sales, how do your former customers describe your brand now?** What led them in another direction?
- **If you are looking to expand into new markets, what is the awareness and potential interest in your brand as it stands right now?** What possible changes would improve its reception?

Good brands should live long lives

Most established brands are resilient and can adapt over time to changing marketplaces, management strategies or new ownership. But it is easy to get away from the core values that created these brands in the first place. Whether the market place demands changes, or a return to roots, in nearly all cases, valuable elements of a brand concept can be retained.

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.