

To Re-wire Your Customer, Re-brand Your Branding

Don't say you don't. To compartmentalize is human. We all do it to some extent or another. It's what gets us through the day.

As human beings, we deal with life's challenges, all those free-floating activities and emotions, by putting them conveniently into neat little boxes. It's absolutely normal, the way we sort through the complexity, dividing and conquering as we go.

Mental organization pacifies real-life disorganization. We do it in our personal matters, love lives, children, and such. We do it in our business lives. And, we do it with cultural icons and activities. The famous, the infamous, even the brands and products we accept or summarily dismiss as unacceptable.

Effective branding actually plays right into this psycho-activity. Companies want us to place their brands into specific cerebral compartments. Brand A is a this. Brand B is a that. In fact, the stronger the brand is built and supported, the more hard-wired it is into a specific mind box.

Which is fine, if you're happy with the box you're in. The challenge arises if you're not. To ask a consumer to re-wire your brand—think about it differently, put it into a different compartment—is a difficult thing. Confusion sets in. “Wait, I don't need any more complications in my life—you're supposed to be this, now you want me to believe you're that—and feel good about it, to boot?”

In order to get consumers to permanently re-wire how they think, feel, react to a brand, you've got to take a re-wired look at exactly how branding is—and should—be done. In fact, I'd say you've got to re-brand branding.

What do I mean?

Let's start by looking at how branding is currently done. The fact is, that while brands help us compartmentalize and, hence, navigate and make sense of our world, the way they're created, managed, even revitalized, is also generally done on a “box-by-box” basis.

Look at any organization and you'll find that most models and approaches to building and revitalizing brands are not only compartmentalized, but bureaucratically so.

Sort of like a stack of building blocks. Let's do the right brain thinking first, then we'll unleash the creative stuff when we're done.

In this build-on process the consumer research department is charged with rationally identifying a powerful consumer insight as a foundation for the brand promise. The marketing department crafts and spins the promise. Product development is charged with developing the technology to deliver the promise. Then, the creative folks come in with their color chips and their logos. Packaging adds the

literal box, or bag. Finally, the communication team arrives to apply the advertising, PR, and messaging to the target group the research gurus had flagged at the beginning of the whole initiative.

This is not a good thing, especially if a complete re-wire is what you're after. Brands are complex, organic entities. They exist on multiple levels, intersecting and criss-crossing on a multitude of dimensions. Creating them is complicated. Revitalizing declining brands can be even more challenging.

To re-brand branding, to strengthen, revitalize and refocus the brand in the consumer's mind, you've got to re-wire your thinking from chock-ablock to something entirely different.

Rather than rearranging boxes, you've got to open them up. Dump everything out. Then, reassemble the contents with a robust mix of creativity and strategic rigor.

I would go so far as to say that re-branded branding is not a process at all, but informed invention. A “eureka” singularity of idea and expression so new, so strong, that the brand is able to claim a unique and totally ownable space in the consumer's mind.

Invention is the integration of piece parts in a way no one has ever done before. They may be familiar parts, but the outcome is completely different.

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Remember, a brand is a promise. At best a dream fulfilled. More realistically, the basic needs of life fulfilled. A re-branded brand, created by way of invention, will deliver on this promise in a way no brand in your category has ever done before.

The strongest brand ideas take an objective look at the same consumer trends everyone else is looking at, but look for a fresh opportunity. The strongest names, identities, positions, packaging solutions are united by creative rigor guided and applied with strategic rigor.

The strongest brands are wired along a single circuit—holistically—taking into consideration all points of customer touch. Taking into consideration exactly which compartment of a consumer's mind they want to occupy.

Examples? Southwest Airlines. The industry certainly isn't new. The way Southwest approaches their brand promise is. Or, Starbucks. Coffee was aromatic caffeine until they turned it into a cultural experience (the American version, anyway). Home Depot—not your father's lumber store, but your mother's, and your Aunt Tilly's. Target, vw, Snapple—all brands that had the vision and courage to step outside their category box and make a dramatic shift toward “being” something else, with experiences that signaled inventive difference.

A brand is not finite, and therein lies its power. Consumers will accept change if the promise, rhyme and reason resonate credibly. Trying to “fix” a component part is not going to yield long-term value, let alone consumer acceptance that something worth thinking about has happened.

Go ahead. Compartmentalize your life all you want. Just don't do it with your brand if you expect to create a consumer mind shift. For that, invent, re-wire, re-brand your whole way of thinking about brands. ■

