

I love you, TiVo, now change

Lack of functionality stymies a great brand as the category it pioneered explodes

I have TiVo. I admit it. And having done so, I also admit I have a few questions.

They have to do with the number of remote control devices I have on my coffee table and the oversized index card sitting next to them explaining to my family members which remote does what. They have to do with the next generation of digital video recorder and video-on-demand options that have surfaced.

But as a branding professional my first question is this: What happened to TiVo's business strategy on the way to developing its brand strategy? As a professional consumer, my second question is: What's happening to TV my way, guys?

The answers after this quick word from your sponsor.

A bit of context. TiVo started out of the gate as a powerful brand-in-the-making. It identified a totally new product idea and established a simple, refreshingly different brand strategy to support it within the nascent category. TiVo created a philosophical movement. Couch potatoes unite! Control TV! TV on your terms! When nothing seemed new any more, TiVo did. That's huge. And, even better, it got there first.

By doing so it captured great emotional space in the consumer's mind. Cult and culture built up around it quickly. Again, good things, and again, very hard to do. TiVo almost immediately took on

the status of Kleenex and Google and FedEx. I'll TiVo it. I'll Google it. I'll FedEx it. And, by the way, hand me a Kleenex. I'm going to sneeze. A unique status by which a brand assumes generic meaning for a product or service category in general. In the case of TiVo, for DVR, or digital video recording, for all you Luddites out there.

OK. The good news for the category is that the DVR culture is thriving. In fact its stronger than ever and growing exponentially. It's predicted that more than 40% of U.S. households will have some sort of DVR device by 2008.

Not OK. The troubling news for TiVo is that cult and culture are moving to other DVR providers for that dose of control TV. TiVo's philosophical movement may be grinding to a halt.

Why? While TiVo did an amazing job of capturing emotional space in the consumer's mind, it's seriously losing momentum in the functionality lane. TiVo may have unintentionally made itself the sacrificial version of the DVR world by giving up its wonderful name to the generic category without realizing any personal long-term value. People may be TiVo-ing "The Sopranos" and wish-listing the best of Bogie, but they're on the couch snuggling up with another brand to do it.

A special challenge

Bottom line. I mean, real bottom line: While TiVo spent its time and

energy focusing on a brilliant brand strategy, it hasn't been delivering on the newest and most basic of category benefits. Which goes back to my first question – and answer – and highlights the special challenge inherent to branding in the tech space.



To succeed in any category – and especially one as dynamic and hyperactive as this one – you've got to keep up with the functional applications of your brand's claim to fame. Which means, your business strategy has to be in absolute lockstep with your brand strategy. At the end of the day, consumers want products that work, and work as well as, if not better than, the expectations set forth by your promises.

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**A product does something.
A brand stands for something.**

What TiVo seems to have lost in the translation from trailer to big screen is that in the world of technology branding products are tangible proof of what the brand should get credit for. TiVo hasn't been keeping its promises.

Which is as good a segue as any into that second question, the one I had as a cult-TiVo member. From what I hear, TV on "my" terms seems to be spinning closer to "theirs." What's the story?

Based on recent news reports, it seems that not only is TiVo losing traction in the functionality arena, but may actually be back-pedaling on that super brand ideal I just raved about. How so?

The company announced a plan last month that would allow advertisers to post small logos over their commercials when consumers fast-forward through them. The plan would also restrict the amount of time a viewer could keep a pay-per-view movie. TV on my terms?

Putting my branding-professional hat back on, I can say it's one thing to play catch-up on product functionality. Many very good brands have done it and pulled out stronger than ever. We've all seen turn-arounds. However, it's another thing entirely to try and repair a compromised emotional relationship. Come on. We all know this. Can I ever trust you again? Once a brand compromises the way consumers perceive it, it's an incredibly difficult thing to gain back loyalty lost. Any brand 101 playbook will tell you that.

As I said, branding in the tech space is hard enough on the rational end without having to worry about the emotional end. TiVo got the hardest half right – it attained that brand fan club that other brands only dream about. My suggestion is that it build on what it thought about and fought for. Concentrate on the business strategy. Put that maverick energy behind the product development that will support and drive the original promise far into the future. External communication isn't the issue – the issue is functionality.

The cult is here. We're waiting. But in this market, we won't wait for long. All we ask is fewer remotes and TV on our terms, and we're still yours. At least, I am. ■

