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Maintaining your brand

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You might think that great brands have inherent staying power. Coca-Cola® is a classic with its scripted font and red can. McDonald's®, with its signature Golden Arches, is one of the most recognized brands in the world. But Coca-Cola red and the McDonald's arches are just the constant outward symbols of otherwise highly evolutionary companies. Coke and McDonald's know that in order to maintain their competitive position they must, above all, maintain their brands.

Think of maintaining your brand like maintaining a home. At a basic level, you have the daily drudgery of sweeping and lawn mowing, cleaning the furnace, and changing the batteries in the smoke detector. That's the day-to-day management you give your brand. That's communicating your message to employees and delivering on your brand promise.

But in order to retain their value, both your home and your brand need a lot more than sweeping and mowing. A home should be attractive and inviting, just like a brand needs good visibility. Both need occasional renovations, and both benefit from a strong circle of family and friends. Care for your brand as you care for your home, and you won't just keep up with the Joneses, you'll keep ahead of them.

Here's a ~~homeowner's~~ (I mean) business owner's guide to brand maintenance:

Advertise

Any home owner is going to pay attention to cosmetic work like painting, planting flowers, and hanging pictures. Consider that advertising. You want your home to look welcoming and inviting, and you want people to take notice. The same goes for maintaining a brand. Part of maintaining relevancy in people's lives is simply being visible and present.

There's an old saying that goes, "The person who saves money by not advertising is like the man who stops the clock to save time."

The first rule of business – and commonly the toughest one for owners to swallow – is you have to spend money to make money. Wise business owners obviously want to keep expenses low. In general, that's a great idea: businesses should seek ways to save their pennies. When you're trying to attract customers, however, you have to be willing to make an investment in your brand. Rarely does a brand grow without any promotion. People need to hear about your company – again and again. If you're a coffee shop, maybe they'll stop in twice a week. If you're a heating and air conditioning company, it might take three years before potential customers will need your help. But when their furnaces break down, you want them to think of your company first.

Before you choose an advertising medium, think about your target audience. If you're trying to attract teenagers to a new skatepark, chances are they probably don't read the newspaper. But if you have an upscale wine bar, your target market might notice your ad strategically placed within the business section. Numerous choices exist for advertising and promotion: billboards, television, magazines, newspapers, Web banners, promotional products, trade show exhibits, direct mail … the list is endless. So how do you choose? Try a mix that you think will best hit your target audience, and find ways to measure response. If the return on investment (ROI) hits your mark, keep it up. If not, try a new medium.

Always remember the sea of brand messaging people wade through every day is immense. No matter where you turn, you can't avoid seeing some type of advertising plea. When was the last time you used a public bathroom without seeing advertising? Brand messages are everywhere! So when you join the plea for customers, you have to stand apart.

Last year, Liberty Tax Service® put employees in Statue of Liberty and Uncle Sam costumes at busy intersections. They waved and handed out imprinted foam crowns throughout the United States during tax season.[1] Paying taxes only comes around once a year, so in the midst of billboards, publication ads, and TV commercials promoting tax accountants, this company found a creative – and cost-effective – approach to getting much-needed attention in a memorable way. And it must be working. The company went from 28th in 2004 to 10th best franchise to own in 2006, according to *Entrepreneur Magazine*.[2]

Renovate & Update

Watch any of those new real estate shows on television? If you do, you know that in order to get the most value for a house, it needs to have modern updates. Shag carpet is out, hardwood floors are in. Pitch the laminate countertops and lay down granite. That's just like keeping tabs on the business marketplace and finding out what your customers want and adapting to those needs.

[1] *www.libertytax.com. Cited October 2006.*
[2] *Top 10 Franchises for 2006. www.entrepreneur.com. Cited October 2006.*
[3] *Charles Schwab press release, 9/27/2005*

Critical to any brand strategy is keen self awareness. Companies are all over this when they launch a new brand. They do their market research, look into consumer demand, and find a competitive niche. But that's not where branding ends. Branding is an ongoing process. If you're any good, your competitors are watching you, and they are following you. So what makes you different in 1998, is very likely status quo in 2006. Consumer demands and expectations change too, and you need to stay abreast of that.

How do you know if your brand isn't being maintained the way it should be? You look for indicators like product sales. Maybe you read what bloggers are saying about your company. You conduct focus groups or surveys and try to find out how customers perceive your brand. This is a regular, ongoing task, not a once-every-20-years kind of thing.

Take something as sober and staid as investment banking. In 2005, financial services powerhouse Charles Schwab Co. launched an irreverent new campaign and invited investors to "Talk to Chuck™." The bold strategy seemed more than a little incongruous with the retiring boomer investor set, but the payoff was nearly immediate. After a six-month test in Houston, Denver and Chicago, all three markets saw a lift in new accounts and net new assets, as well as significant increases in unaided consumer awareness of Schwab in general.

The strategy at work here is that Schwab did not change its brand philosophies for momentary market dominance. Rather, the company promoted an emphasis on personal relationships that had always been at the core of its business model. What's more, the company implemented the branding strategy at every point of customer contact from its adverting campaign, to its Web site, to on-site signage.

In a press release announcing the campaign, Becky Saeger, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer, explained how the message leveraged existing consumer attitudes toward the firm: "Investors see Schwab as a firm that has consistently listened and responded to the needs of individual investors, and there's a tremendous amount of trust and equity built up in our name," Saeger said. "'Talk to Chuck' is an invitation to bring us the very real issues they face in their financial lives and a promise that we'll listen and respond to their needs."

wll but disappeared in favor of ads featuring chic, urbanites who patronize McDonald's for salads, health-conscious wraps, and wireless internet service. Visit McDonald's Web site and you'll see consistent messages on fitness and a balanced lifestyle. All the McDonald's favorites are still there—the Big Mac® and the Chicken McNuggets®—but those high calorie staples are taking back stage for a while.

Listen to what your customers and potential customers say about your brand. Watch for changes in the target audience. If a younger, hipper crowd starts smoking cigars, adjust your advertising.

Consistency Counts

Realtors know that period details make a difference. They weep in agony when classic features such as claw foot tubs or art deco lamps are removed in favor of contemporary alternatives. Sometimes change isn't all it's cracked up to be. The challenge here is knowing when to change and when to stay the same.

Brands should evolve.But marketers must be careful to leverage brand equity and maintain a consistent message, too. Your customers can't follow if you keep changing direction every few years. They need time to think about and absorb your marketing message, so don't change it simply because you're tired of it. Consistency is a huge challenge, and the difficulty comes on two levels:

First, your business practices must be consistent with your brand message, and this really gets back to day-to-day brand management. You can't brand yourself as a cold-weather plant specialist and then go around recommending delicate tropicals. A custom art gallery wouldn't dare offer reproductions. Taco Bell® can't start carrying burgers or buns. People would get confused. They wouldn't trust you to deliver on your promise, and they'd take their business elsewhere.

To create consistency, look at the full scope of your organization from your employees, to your facility, to your marketing collateral. Above all, your employees must buy into your brand promise and deliver on it every day. Your customer service representatives must be ambassadors of your brand. Communicate your values and engage in dialogue with your employees. The folks on your front lines will be the best ones to tell how the customer experience could be improved.

Second, you need to keep your marketing message on point. Year after year after year. You're brand is going to get boring . . . to you. After three years of developing, launching, evaluating, and honing a message, you are going to be sick to death of it. Follow the advice given to any angst ridden teenager, and "just deal with it." Stay the course. Your customers may be just beginning to catch on.

Once your brand is established, it has what marketers call brand equity. That is, customers understand it and relate to it. Unfortunately, there can be a fine line between leveraging brand equity and maintaining relevancy. Too often, marketing managers develop attention deficit disorder. They are too close to the campaign, they get bored with it, and they start tinkering. Other times, mangers are desperate to fill all niches, meet all needs, and be everything to everyone. They think, "If I just broaden my scope this much further, look at the extra business I can get." Again, customers get confused. You've destroyed your differentiation.

Consistency takes a lot of discipline, but the best brands do it well. Remember, after all these years, John Deere tractors are still green.

Brand Loyalists

Nothing makes a house a home more than a circle of friends and family to enjoy it with you. Good brand managers foster the same circle of friends around their company. These people are called brand loyalists.

Loyal customers are the key to any business, whether you're a dry cleaner, a grocery store, a landscaper, or anything else. Loyal customers keep coming back, and they're likely to spread the word about how much they love your brand. Think of ways to make them feel welcomed and appreciated:

- When a customer purchases a Volkswagen®, the car company sends a VW-branded promotional product to his or her home just at the time when buyer's remorse can set in. (You know that feeling when you start to regret spending money.) The gift, a VW-branded tin with coasters inside, helps the car owner see VW as a caring company, renewing his or her enthusiasm about the brand. This is a concept that would work for most large product distributors like vacuum cleaners, boats, or furniture. Send your customers a gift on the anniversary of their purchase. You could even include a satisfaction survey and a percent off coupon for a product upgrade.
- At one small Thai restaurant we know, the owner-chef always makes his rounds in the dining room, greeting customers. At another, the owners send out free dessert coupons for your birthday and anniversary. As a result, diners feel special, connected, and appreciated.

- Another restaurant owner recently exemplified his appreciation for loyal customers with an anniversary celebration. To celebrate his pizzeria's 50th anniversary, he offered a 50-cent special each night for a week: spaghetti, medium pizza, etc. The key to the offer was he didn't advertise to the public. He used his Web site, e-mail newsletter, and fliers in the restaurant to spread the news. In the owner's eyes, this promotion served one purpose: to reward and thank those customers who had made the past 50 years great!

These business owners understand that customer retention is critical. It's what Malcolm Gladwell referred to as the "stickiness factor" in *The Tipping Point*, his landmark book on trends and epidemics.[4] Once you have a customer, you want them to stick. So you need to build a culture that is notable and appealing to your customer base.

Case Study: CR Meyer

CR Meyer, an Oshkosh, Wis.-based construction company since 1888, knows that reputation and brand have a strong impact on customer choice. Ongoing emphasis on brand maintenance is what has helped this company become a dominant player in the construction industry.

After more than a century's worth of success, CR Meyer decided it was time for a company-wide facelift. The goal was to reinforce the already strong values of their brand: safety, integrity, pursuit of perfection, customer focus, relationships, innovative spirit and solutions, and passion for their work.

These values start at the top and are embodied by every person CR Meyer employs. Management recognizes that people gather feelings about the organization's brand through interaction with its employees.

"The values that CR Meyer lives by are not dictated to employees through a poster on the wall, but are rather a reflection of how our management and our employees actually act," says Marketing Coordinator Heidi Reinke. "Living these values is what the brand is all about."

The company started refreshing its brand by working with an advertising agency that performed primary and secondary research on the state of the brand and its strengths in comparison to its competitors. The research prompted slight transformations in the company's logo to a more streamlined and cleaner image. In particular, the yellow construction hat was removed to communicate a more

[4] *The Tipping Point. Malcolm Gladwell. Published in 2000 by Little, Brown and Company.*

humble organization. While the logo transformation was slight, the facelift was integral in maintaining the company's values.

Original logo

Revised logo

Utilizing the renovated logo and brand messaging, new marketing pieces and brand standards were developed. CR Meyer also decided to renovate its home office to reflect its values. The atmosphere it will convey once the renovation is completed in 2007 is one of a first-class, professional, high quality contractor that is at the same time innovative, conservative and humble. Office ergonomics are being put in to place with employees in mind. From this, clients will see that the business is people-focused and CR Meyer will see a more productive, energetic and safety-minded workforce.

As for brand standards, Reinke stressed the importance of their continued reinforcement. CR Meyer spells out how its brand and logo should be consistently represented to the public in a brand standards manual that's given to every employee. The manual goes in-depth to describe everything from logo usage and graphic design elements to message consistency. Even how phones are answered, client entertainment and holiday gift-giving have been infused with the brand philosophy.

The latter is an area where CR Meyer makes high marks in brand maintenance and differentiation. For the last two years, the company has placed a greater emphasis on personalizing its holiday gifts for key clients and employees. In 2005, CR Meyer packed a steak-and-potatoes-themed custom gift box. Loyal customers received a pair of gourmet beef tenderloins, seasonings and a set of grilling tools each with the recipient's name emblazoned on the handles. While the gift's creation posed some real logistical challenges, CR Meyer stayed top-of-mind with its brand loyalists by showing that it is willing to go the extra mile and create something that is distinctive and exclusive for its customers. The extra work was seen by recipients as a reflection of the kind of attention the company will give them everyday.

CR Meyer knows that every interaction an employee has with its customers is a reflection of its brand. No matter whom in the company, from the CEO to the receptionists, it's all about building positive and trusting relationships. Because as Reinke points out:

"Our greatest reward is to be invited back for a client's next project."

Whatever the size and reach of your company, you can learn from the examples of Coca-Cola, Liberty Tax and CR Meyer. Staying on top isn't easy, but it's possible. Being creative, striving to stay top-of-mind, reaching prospects in new places, and rewarding your loyal fan base are all keys to driving growth and success.