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From A to Brand

10 Essentials for Brand Success

Introduction

On paper, brand development looks simple and straightforward. In practice, all kinds of variables influence how smoothly the process moves forward, how powerful the deliverables will be, and how fully new tools and insights will be adopted and used. We've found the following practices help to keep our clients happy and our development efforts on track.

10 Essentials for Brand Success

1. Pay attention to the competition.

From time to time, we've heard corporate leaders state that there's no need to consider the competition in their brand development: As long as the team remains highly motivated and mission-focused in its drive to achieve its strategic business objectives, they reason, the business will prevail. Auditing a work session on one occasion, we saw team members high-five each other as they identified and embraced a positioning one of their key competitors already claimed. Maybe knowing this wouldn't have mattered: Maybe the folks in the room figured they'd triumph in a head-to-head marketing slugfest regardless. Such a waste of treasure and talent. Differentiation is one of the primary keys to brand success. And differentiation depends on knowing who and what you're differentiated from. Don't skimp on competitive brand intel. We love it when a marketing team has battle cards to share with us. Reverse engineer competitor's brand communications platforms if need be. The marketplace is intensely competitive, and you're not only competing against yourself.

2. Work outwards from the vision.

A company's vision statement is a cornerstone of its business—something it ought to have in place from the beginning, well before it turns its attention to defining and building its brand. That said, the vision plays a vital role in telling the story of the brand as well: For us, it's what sets the brand story in motion. Surprisingly, we find a fair number of companies operating without a vision or with a vision that fails to express a bold future state. Some conflate vision and mission. Others operate from an implied sense of vision without ever nailing it down explicitly. Years ago, doing work for Taylor Guitars, I marveled at how Bob Taylor, the company's highly engaged and quirkily charismatic founder, could guide and inspire others without the need for a formal statement. He was the rarest of exceptions. And one Australian company told us it didn't believe in a vision whatsoever. Pursuing revenue in a purely opportunistic way suited it just fine. Regardless of the financial success a vision-free company might enjoy, a vision-free brand is a brand that operates with a serious handicap. Customers want to go on a journey, and the vision helps to lay its bricks. (And yes, we passed on working with the Australian company.)

3. Keep your staff informed.

Once your newly expressed or repointed brand is ready to launch, you will want to share it with the rest of the organization. You will want staff buy-in at every level. You will want team members to rep the brand as only members of your organization can do. You might even want to explore ways to operationalize the brand outside of Marketing, Sales, and HR. So why wait to bring everyone up to speed? Communicate the need for brand work at the very beginning of the initiative, if not before. Illustrate how the brand work will benefit not only the company as a whole but every individual within it. Provide leadership endorsement. Report on progress. And consider building in opportunities to solicit input where input is meaningful.

4. Distinguish between strategy and tactics. Then see that the two are in synch.

Brand-building is a fundamentally strategic concern: It's designed to support long-term business goals. Most digital marketing tools, on the other hand, are tactical tools. Powerful and sophisticated as they are, the metrics they provide aren't likely to deliver to their potential if they aren't viewed from the perspective of strategic priorities. Too often, we find a company's growth marketers and social media managers operating without a clear understanding of the brand's cornerstones. If you are a leader, challenge and help them to align their efforts— and their metrics—around the bigger ideas expressed by the brand. In principle, tactics and strategy coexist in a virtuous circle.

5. Define success—and monitor progress.

As a rule, clients undertake brand-building or -updating initiatives because they have one or more specific, strategic goals in mind and believe their story can support those goals. Those goals might be to enter into a new market, introduce a more diversified offering, integrate a new acquisition, reach a different type of customer, any number of things. One key of good brand building is to keep sight of those goals—and to remember that strategic objectives call for strategic assessments. Ultimately, we look for nothing more than a simple answer—yes—to two questions: "Did the organization achieve its objectives?" and "Did the brand story help the organization to do so?" Metrics that don't address the latter point are irrelevant. I remember a head of Global Brand Strategy claiming vast increases in web site visitation and email open rates as an important accomplishment. Hmm, if you say so. Note, too, that while virtually every goal implies a positive financial outcome, the most relevant measures aren't always financial. They might consist of changes in sentiment, rates of adoption, acquisition of key customers, higher closing rates, and so on. Each initiative will have its own key performance indicators (KPIs). We encourage clients to consider these KPIs at the outset and the means by which they will monitor them. And then, of course, to do so.

6. Preview the deliverables.

From inheriting all manner of frameworks, blueprints, platforms and guidelines created by others, we can't escape one conclusion: their quality, presentation, content and depth vary widely. Too often, clients express reservations about moving forward with new initiatives because they feel they've been poorly served in the past. When we see what they've been provided, we tend to agree. So, until more unified standards of practice exist in our profession, we make a point of uploading samples that model what we're proposing to deliver. Often we include "interim" deliverables such as work session agendas and conversation guides in addition to platform documents to give an even more concrete sense of our process and approach. Clients always appreciate this. Fringe benefit: When we can show a continuum of deliverables from first to last, we help our clients to connect the dots between strategy and activation, too.

7. Provide examples.

As with previewing deliverables, providing examples helps to make brand concepts clear and concrete. CMOs and other communications professionals might not be challenged to envision how a more sharply defined positioning will come across on a web page, say, or how a newly developed set of personality attributes might affect the tone of copy, but members of their company's leadership team are another story. To help brand marketers secure approval from those who spend less time in the brand-building boiler room, communications examples can make all the difference. Before and after examples can be especially effective.

8. Allow break-in time for the brand.

We prefer somewhat loose brand guidelines to guidelines that are rigid and prescriptive. Doing so gives brand communicators the creativity and flexibility to interpret the guidelines in a way that brings their own training and sensibility into play. To support this approach, following delivery of the guidelines we allow for a period of regular interaction with communications teams to review early work, provide guidance, and address any issues that might arise. This is the time to address any new use cases or applications that might surface, to revise existing guidelines based on real world considerations, and make sure creative teams feel versed and comfortable with the content.

9. Listen not only for content but also for style.

Our approach to discovery borrows a bit from journalism and a bit from cultural anthropology. Interviews are of paramount importance. We tend to regard them more as "guided conversations" than as "information extractions": We want the people we're speaking to not only to respond to our questions but also to offer up fresh perspectives on their own, to engage in free association, and to move past rote, expected responses to frame their thoughts in fresh ways and arrive at new insights into their brand for themselves. In our role as storytellers, we're naturally attuned not only to what people say but also to how they say it. We'll freely admit it: Some of the best descriptions, taglines, slogans and other lightning rod messages have come straight from their lips. Our skill rested in creating a space for their voice to come to life.

10. Stay open.

We enter our work knowing that we must compensate for the inherent biases and limitations of our own knowledge base. We have been fortunate to work on behalf of individuals with very different perspectives, frames of reference, and world views from our own. We must become versed in industries in which we have never worked "on the inside." We cannot assume that we hear or understand others as they wish to be heard even when we are listening intently. Therefore, we welcome their critical guidance as we work out the terms and definitions that they and others will use to express themselves and to connect with their audiences. In this vein, it is never enough to settle for labels alone to characterize a brand's personality, say, or an organization's values. In creating communications, how useful is it, really, to know nothing more about a brand's personality than that it is "bold, caring, passionate and [fill in the blank]?" We owe it to the creatives and communicators who follow to provide as much richness and dimension around such labels as we can. The tools we build are designed to be easy to reference and use. By the time we deliver them, we need to have considered every nuance, to account for every decision, and to stand by every word.