

And Branding Makes It So. By Julie Cucchi

In advertising circles, there is a famous (in advertising circles) story about legendary ad man, Rosser Reeves, in which he pulls two quarters from his pocket and explains that his job is to make the consumer believe the one in his right hand is worth more than the one in his left.

The idea that the purpose of branding is to differentiate between otherwise identical products is widely accepted by cynics, realists, academics and many practitioners. Even in cases where the brand personality actually reflects true product superiority, the underlying assumption is that branding is an applied variable to the surface of a product which is itself the constant; it's a spin, a gloss, or at best, a cogent expression of the hand dealt.

It would be silly to deny the power of branding to create wealth and fame (not to mention shelf space) for otherwise undifferentiated products. In his book, *Branded Nation*, James Twitchell points out that, in fact, the consumer is often willing to pay a premium for a compelling brand 'story' or 'narrative'. It becomes, he argues, another tangible product attribute.

Branding, of course, can shine a light on a central, relevant product differentiator in those cases where one actually does exist. But there is another power of branding, largely overlooked, except by those CEOs and assorted brand stewards who have witnessed it first-hand.

Call it the power of the brand to make it so.

Walking The Talk

Branding helps companies, institutions, products and individuals define themselves not only to others, but to themselves. This is perhaps the most powerful reason to undertake the difficult work required to arrive at a well-defined, commonly agreed upon brand vision. Even those who embark on this journey of brand definition underestimate how what they end up with then becomes something the product, the institution and its minders will have to live up to. Once it is branded, and you say it is so, well, it had better be so. To amend Bill Bernbach's famous words, there's nothing worse for a bad product than good branding.

A good brand steward - the founder, the CEO or VP of Marketing - follows through on the job begun by their branding partners by picking the right employees, diligently allocating spending against on-brand efforts while eliminating off-brand ones and creating brand relevant alliances. This is truly where the commitment to the branding process is proven. Arriving at a clear and powerful brand vision isn't easy. But living up to that vision is even harder.

One can imagine, for instance, the leaders of Southwest Airlines staying awake nights devising new ways to deliver on their “Golden Rule” (do unto customers as you would have them do unto you) brand mantra. Every new program, event and promotion is designed against this standard the brand sets to be “the friendliest” and “the best place to work” - to foster “company spirit.” As great a leader as Herb Kelleher is, one has the distinct impression that even he is aware he runs a brand he has to live up to.

Hoist By Their Own Brand Petard

Anyone who doubts the ability of a strong brand to demand the allegiance of its keepers need only look at what happens to those who deny it.

The Martha Stewart brand was defined by meticulous attention to detail and the founder’s pure love of the domestic arts. Stewart’s sloppy financial management, at best, and greediness and mendacity, at worst, not only violated the law, it violated the brand.

If Nike’s brand ethos had not been built upon the dignity of the individual spirit its treatment of third world workers would not have appeared quite so egregious. Nor, perhaps, would Nike’s response to the outcry have had to have been so swift.

On the other hand, Tylenol’s masterful handling of a potentially disastrous tampering event was surely in part inspired by the understanding that the brand lived or died on its reputation of trust and safety. In other words, the brand demanded the finest hour of its stewards. Hypocrisy is a quality that great brands rarely forgive. Integrity - of intention, of purpose, of action - is what they require.

Before Superbowl III, quarterback Joe Namath famously “guaranteed” a victory for his team which was, at the time, an 18 point underdog. A teammate later said, “Once Joe made his prediction, we had to live up to it. His vision made it true.”

Here’s to the brands that point to the bleachers, great brands who inspire their CEOs and brand managers alike to greatness simply by giving them something to live up to. And here’s to all those who not only make a clear brand statement, but then make it so.