

Is it ever too early to know who you are?

A recent headline in the NY Times reads: “Fledgling Festival Seeks an Identity.” The subject of the article is the TriBeCa Film Festival, which began as an attempt to rejuvenate Lower Manhattan in the settling dust of 9/11, and now must prove its “staying power.”

If ever there was a case for the need to create a powerful brand identity, the TriBeCa Film Festival offers one. Its competition is fierce. Its strongest competitors, such as Sundance, are clearly branded. It has a well established local rival in the New York Film Festival. Finally, it was founded with a topical mission that is in danger of losing its relevance as we move farther from 9/11. All of which begs the questions, ‘Why the TriBeCa Film Festival? Why here? Why now?’

The article’s headline suggests a brand that has embraced the wisdom of tackling its central questions of identity, vision and purpose. But the Festival’s executives make it clear they believe it’s too early to do so. “We’re still trying to figure out what we are, ” Ms. Rosenthal, one of its founders, says. “It’s like asking a child at 2, ‘What are you going to be when you grow up?’”

Any brand struggling with its own identity issues, debating the need to do the work necessary to define itself, might share this sentiment. The notion that there exists a time when it is still ‘too early’ is seductive to those who resist the process. But the reasons to tackle these issues earlier rather than later, before the brand suffers irreparably from identity neglect, are too compelling to be ignored.

Rather than comparing the TriBeCa Film Festival to a child, why not compare the brand to a film in the early stages of production? Any film with no clear vision of what it wanted to be when it eventually hit the theaters would be doomed to fail. One can sympathize with the temptation to take a ‘learn-as-we-go,’ ‘let it shape itself organically’ attitude; still, there is little question that down this road disaster lies. The marketplace is littered with failed brands to prove it.

A cultural event with ambitions to become a serious New York institution, (or any brand wishing to become an icon), which the Festival surely has, must begin with a clearly articulated core target, mission, vision and set of defining values: a ‘brand essence.’ This is a critical asset, both for its internal as well as its external constituents.

To define its essence a brand must begin by clearly identifying its central target audience. Ms. Rosenthal admits “we’re a bit schizophrenic because we do want to be perceived as a serious film festival.” And later, “ But it is also about having an online vote for the best love story ever filmed in New York.” Finding the sweet spot target around which your brand will be formed doesn’t necessarily mean your brand must sacrifice its sometimes contradictory ambitions or target audiences. But it requires a willingness to set clear priorities, define a target focal point and create coherent connective tissue that will make sense to everyone—from employees to donors to the brand consumers to the media.

Next, any brand in the throws of self-discovery needs to be informed by an insightful point of view regarding the competitive landscape. This means more than coming up with a list of competitors. It requires a deep understanding of the position they occupy in the minds of your stated target.

Mr. Scarlet, the director of the TriBeCa Film Festival admits “There are too many cookie-cutter festivals.” The organizers claim, however, that despite the number of festivals out there “there is room for one more.” There may well be. But to make that case (to everyone from donors to participants to viewing audience) TriBeCa must feel confident that they have the right to shoulder their way into this crowded arena. They need to be equipped to powerfully state their case in clear and compelling terms. Every aspect of a brand’s expression must, in the end, articulate why it’s not “cookie-cutter” and why it is much more than just “one more.”

Then there is the problem tackled by many an ambitious and failed corporate off-site: the definition and articulation of a central mission. Here, TriBeCa has its work cut out for it. One the one hand, Ms. Rosenthal says it was initially “about making sure the hardware store, the pizza man—everyone—could get over this [9/11] hump.” Is this still central to its current mission? If so, what does that have to do with the relationship the viewing public has with the Festival? Is the fact that the brand brings business and people into the area a nice by-product or a core brand attribute? For the Festival, the central question is this: how can the brand’s initial reason for being (a permanent part of its DNA) translate into a relevant, ongoing mission?

Finally, this brand needs to address an issue fundamental to all brands with a ‘star’ leader or founder. The TriBeCa Film Festival needs to come to terms with its identity as it relates to its most visible centerpiece, Robert DeNiro. At a City Hall news conference DeNiro recently said, “This neighborhood is my home. I’m committed to it and that’s what this festival is all about.” Whatever the Festival finally decides it is “all about” it will have to more clearly define the strategic relevance of DeNiro, the fact that he is a TriBeCa denizen, and if or how he can become a symbol of the brand. (Again, an instructive model is the seamless strategic connection between Robert Redford, his passions and values, and Sundance.)

Whether your brand is established or in the ‘just learning to walk’ stage, the need for a powerfully articulated brand identity is inescapable. If well managed and astutely executed the resulting vision will prevent confusion and inefficiency (both financial and emotional). A clear brand essence is the necessary foundation for a vibrant, healthy brand with staying power.

The TriBeCa Film Festival, and undefined brands everywhere, would be well advised to take a page from Robert DeNiro himself. As a very young actor in his early films DeNiro knew it wasn’t too early to start defining his singular brand essence. He knew exactly what he ‘wanted to be’ when he grew up. Twenty five years later this essence still serves him well.