

A BRIEF ANATOMY OF BRANDING

By Ali Shah, CBC

We are born without prejudice or preference, in a state of fleeting neutrality. Yet from the moment we develop some notion of free will, we begin to form dogmas so strong, they often shade our choices for a lifetime.

Branding, at its core, is the silent business of creating preconception – shaping customer opinion prior to experience. The aim is to segregate yourself in the hearts and minds of your audience. At its best, a brand can foster a bias for your product that transcends borders, generations and even reason.

For this to happen requires many things. Chief among them is commitment, capital and a kicking communications concept. None of which, sadly, is particularly easy to come by.

You can, however, make the most of what you do have by following some refreshingly straightforward principles.

Genesis

In commerce a brand usually means a product, service or organisation (although it can refer to a person, place or even a movement). Whatever you're promoting, the purpose of branding is to win customer acknowledgment and allegiance – very human qualities (believe it or not). Outwardly a brand should be equally sentient, radiating warmth and personality. Beneath the surface, however, it must draw its vitality from a stable skeleton and fixed genetic code. And it's here, deep within, brand creation begins.

Bone and marrow

Every beautiful brand has a skeleton in the closet. She's called strategy and is more notable for her mind than her magnificence. Nevertheless, a brand for all his peacocking is nothing without his sensible soul mate.

What a strategy provides is stability and direction. All successful brands have a distinguishing quality that distances them from the hoi polloi. The purpose of a brand strategy is to locate this appeal and define it in explicit detail. There's little sorcery here. It's a matter of interpreting an organisation's ambitions, products, markets, competitors, resources and target audience. The intent is to simmer these ingredients down to a fine concentrate – the very essence of your offering.

Sin

Developing a strong, healthy brand strategy is seldom as easy as it sounds. Any fractures in the logic, even if innocuous at the strategy stage, often prove fatal in implementation. By far the most common flaw is attempting to be all things to all people. Even companies built up around a clear, narrow business concept succumb to this temptation.

However, there are other deadlier sins. Some companies submit to vanity, publicizing virtues mainly of

interest to themselves. Others, deluded by desire, try to be something they're not. A rare, tortured few seek redemption through promoting their weaknesses. All such immoderations are to be avoided.

Spirit

Of course a brand strategy needs ambition, but let honesty guide your judgement. Branding, after all, is about self-censorship – judging yourself before others judge you. If your case isn't convincing, the rough justice of market censure is a likely outcome. Better to pick the one thing you do exceptionally well and build your argument around that.

Ultimately your position in the market and promise to the world needs fulfil only three criteria: It must be believable (based on a credible premise); relevant (of importance to the target audience); and enduring (enshrined around a lasting virtue). If you can tick these three boxes, chances are you've centred on the right appeal, and one that lends itself to creative dramatisation.

Flesh and blood

If a brand strategy is your inner self – rational, honest, composed – then think of a creative concept as your public alter ego – emotional, enliv-

ening and prone to embellishment.

That's because the purpose of a concept is to fly under the radar of rational thought. It must be able to captivate an audience and stealthily deposit your message, without arousing suspicion.

Heart

Communications is an instinctive, primal trait, and it's on this level that concepts operate. There's no formula for conjuring creative ideas. However, the best concepts share two basic principles: they're genuinely original and irresistibly engaging. There's good reason why these principles work.

Originality invites attention. Most of us are on autopilot most of the time, predicting and reacting to the world around us based on experience and intuition. Only when we encounter something unexpected or unfamiliar do we really take notice. In terms of communications this means abandoning the comfort blanket of familiarity, and daring to zig when the world zags.

Engagement encourages memory. People tend to remember things that touched them in one way or another. Make someone laugh, cry, reflect, flinch, seethe and in all likelihood they will not forget you in a hurry. Emotions, for the most part, command greater influence over us than

reason. So when it comes to working your way into a customer's affections, never underestimate the power of attributes such as humour, optimism or passion.

Mind

The prophets of enumeration are fond of questioning the point of "creativity". They cite effectiveness as the sole measure of success, denouncing ads that "entertain" as futile. Yet it's simplistic to separate cause and effect in this way. The role of advertising is to entertain, to convey your message in a way that inclines people to listen, remember and act.

Of course, it's tempting to think creativity just obscures the message. But the belief that incontestable clarity is all that's needed to cut through the communications clutter is mistaken. Most companies actually seek to say the same thing, and prosaic messages quickly blend into one another. Getting through is entirely a matter of making your point in a fresh, interesting way.

Body and soul

The final phase of birthing a successful brand is implementation. The aim of a media strategy is to ensure the target audience is exposed to

your message at relevant intervals and in relevant places. Given the fragmentation of traditional media and rise of online and mobile media in recent times, media strategies are increasingly mixed and inventive. Add to that the fact that many new media options are easy to measure, and it's not hard to see why media planners are the new darlings of the marketing manager. In truth, media is vital but interdependent on strategy and concept. The best media plans are those where strategy, content and channel work in harmony.

Free will

There, in splendid generality, are the fundamentals of brand building, seen from a marketing communications point of view. It may all seem a little unscientific at a time when branding aspires to the rarefied altitudes of academic discipline. But it's worth bearing in mind that image-building initiatives most commonly fail as a result of compromising basic principles, rather than ignoring intellectual intricacies.

A final thing worth noting for those seeking scholarly enlightenment: For all the strategies and systems, concepts and committees, a brand – at its best – only ever resides among the prejudices of the subconscious.

