

SERIES INTRODUCTION:

In "A New Brand World," author Scott Bedbury, who helped build such monster brands as Starbucks and Nike, calls branding:

"an organizing principle so broad yet so defining that it can shape and direct just about everything a company does, and, most important, how it does it. ... a process that, when it works well, should leave no facet of a company untouched. And no business practice unexamined."

He goes on to say that building a brand "is the most challenging, complicated, and painstaking process that a company can embark on. It's more intuitive than analytical, and most of the time it can't be seen. But it can always be felt."

OK, LESSON NO. 1:

Branding is intangible. Despite all the books, the seminars, the lists of rules and principles that try to give you the golden key, there's definitely a little bit of magic to it and a lotta bit of luck. Because you are not branding your product on an island, your brand can be affected by all sorts of outside influences – something as simple as the launch of a book that catches fire and changes the social psyche, which causes a commercial chain reaction that renders your brand obsolete or crowns you king of the hill. (By the way, both situations – one your worst nightmare, the other your wildest dream – can be dangerous if you're not prepared.)

But there are also proven concrete aspects to the branding process that can help mitigate those outside your control: disciplines to be adopted, practices to be perfected so that if you find yourself at the bottom of the heap, your brand is strong enough to fight its way back up, or, if you were lucky enough to land at the top, dig in and stay there.

So, here at *Pulse*, we decided to put together a series of articles on branding that would take some of the guesswork out of the process, with concrete examples and advice from our very own industry veterans.

This is the first in the series. Enjoy!

THAT'S MY STORY AND I'M STICKING TO IT

BY SUSAN MCDANIEL

It seems the visual aspects of branding are often the easiest to grasp, perhaps because they are the most obvious manifestations of it – the red on a Coke can versus Pepsi Blue, the simplicity of the Nike swoosh, the expected concrete flooring in an Old Navy store. But building a brand is a comprehensive process that involves everything about a business, from creating a product or facility's look to choosing the music callers hear when they're on hold to determining how a company will interact in its community. Because it touches every single aspect of a business, the branding process can be overwhelming.

But just as every journey starts with a single step, there is a distinct starting point in creating a brand: Before you decide on taupe or gray, glass or plastic, stucco or teak, you need to know your company's story.

Your "story" is made up of who you are as a company, what you believe in, what you're about, basically your core philosophy and values. Defining your company – writing your story – will take much of the mystery out of the branding process.

"Once a business has gone through identifying and defining not only the mission and the goals but the values and philosophy of the company or the business," said Tara Grodjek, president and founder of Tara Spa Therapy, "that then makes it really clear what you need to express from that."

FINDING THE ESSENCE

The process of defining your company's story is basically a careful brainstorming exercise that can be done with your entire team, your management team or your executive team. It is a comprehensive look at the values and philosophies of the company that goes beyond its products, its services or its history and seeks to define the essence. Then, once you've defined that essence, you need to be sure you consistently communicate it to the people who matter most: your core customers, your potential customers and your employees.

"You have to be really clear about who you are and what you stand for – your values and philosophy," said Grodjek. "Then you start expressing who you are through the design of the facility and the collateral material and the way you communicate your message and how you train your staff. So it's really important that you start with the core."

To brand Tara Spa Therapy, Grodjek's team identified specific words that represented the values of her company and wrote those words on cards, which they keep in their offices.

"But if you're confident in your brand, the platform you're going to build your brand on, then don't let other people influence that; don't walk away from it."

Through the consulting division of her company, Grodjek takes her branding clients through a similar exercise to help them identify and express who they are, what the property's about, the points of distinction, their market.

"That process or some kind of process in aligning the team is really important," she said.

It's hard to emphasize that point enough. This is no time to take shortcuts.

In his 15 years in the advertising industry, Denis Simioni, CEO and founder of Ojon Hair Care and CEO of Waldon and Associates in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, has seen firsthand the fallout from skipping this first step.

"So many clients come to us after they've been in

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the market for five years and they want to do a re-branding," said Simioni. "There are two setbacks. One, you're going to lose any equity you've built up, and two, it's so expensive to change everything – you're almost starting from scratch. When you do it right from the beginning, you don't have to go back."

Our current consumer-driven business climate also disallows a haphazard stab at the branding process. The consumer mindset has changed. With the Internet at their fingertips, consumers have access to a depth of information never available before.

"The consumer is getting so smart, so savvy," noted Simioni. "They want to know more about the product or the service. They want to go in depth. These days, they'll e-mail you and ask you for an ingredient listing. They're very aware of what they're purchasing."

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And this is no time to put your faith in the strength of advertising to buck up a poorly constructed brand. Today's consumers easily see through the market-ese (or market-tease) of traditional advertising. Even if they don't, technologies like TiVo and satellite radio are helping them tune it out. Add to that the fact that companies are under more scrutiny now than ever before.

"Where we once looked at brands on a surface level," writes Bedbury, "we now view them in more intimate and multidimensional terms. We plumb their depths, looking for reassurance that they are good, responsible, sensitive, knowing, and hip."

So, do it right the first time.

STICKING TO IT

Once you've defined your essence, all you have to do is stick to it. It sounds so easy in theory. But when revenue streams and

bottom lines are involved, a company can be easily pulled off center.

Don't let that happen. Return again and again to your core values and philosophy when making business decisions. Create a brand mantra (see sidebar) and emphasize it again and again to your employees and partners.

"It's a challenge," said Sue Moore, manager of marketing and communications of Willow Stream The Spas at Fairmont, describing the branding process. "But if you're confident in your brand, the platform you're going to build your brand on, then don't let other people influence that; don't walk away from it."

Here's a more concrete example of how holding fast to your core values and philosophy can require tough decisions but also reap rewards.

In November 2003, Aveda Corporation announced it would be discontinuing its *Indigenous* product line (which contained three products at the time) and abandoning the "Indigenous" trademark. The product line had been on the market for about a year.

"We thought it was a great thing to use the Indigenous trademark name for a line that was developed by Native Americans, and, in fact, used Native American ingredients," recalled Chris Hacker, senior vice president of global marketing and design for Aveda Corporation. "We thought it was a real tribute to the indigenous peoples, and part of the proceeds of the line went into a fund for indigenous groups to do the work they need to do on plant issues in their communities. It was very Aveda in the way it was developed."

However, a year after the products appeared on the market, Aveda headquarters was visited by a group of representatives of several indigenous nations of the Americas and Australasia.

"They felt it was insulting that we had trademarked the name, and they were prepared to begin a boycott of Aveda products," said Hacker.

At the end of the meeting, Aveda President Dominique Conseil, stood up and said, "We'll discontinue the line tomorrow."

Interestingly, both Aveda's development of the *Indigenous* product line and their quick decision to discontinue it grew directly out of the company's mission: "To care for the world we live in, from the products we make to the ways in which we give back to society. At Aveda, we strive to set an example for envi-

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ronmental leadership and responsibility, not just in the world of beauty, but around the world.”

They knew their company story and they stuck to it.

“The group that came to talk to us, which was really upset at the time, had a complete turnaround in terms of their attitude about Aveda,” Hacker said. “And our relationship with indigenous people is even better now than it was before that. We learned a valuable lesson.”

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

When Robert Frost penned the line “A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet,” obviously he wasn’t thinking of 21ST century branding principles. Because if you’ve done your branding correctly, defined your essence, written your story, a rose by any other name ... won’t be a rose.

The unique essence of your “rose” or spa or product will set it apart in terms of all five – make that six – senses. It will smell different, look different, sound different, feel different, taste different and *seem* different than any other product in your industry.

That’s a tall order in a world awash in products and services, and an even taller order when you consider that you’re trying to set yourself apart within a particular industry.

But you can trust the system, says Tara Spa Therapy’s Grodjesk.

“What’s interesting is that as many projects as I’ve worked on, each concept is different. You think, ‘How can you turn out a new brand. It’s all the same.’” she said. “But it’s just like individuals; it’s just like human beings. Each one is unique.”

So, know your difference; know your unique qualities and embrace them. Don’t try to adopt or copy someone else’s brand. That’s theirs; you need to define and embrace yours. ■

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RESOURCE FINDER

The 2005 ISPA Conference & Expo featured several Professional Development Sessions on branding and marketing. For a refresher, visit www.experienceispa.com to purchase audio recordings of the sessions.

THE BRAND MANTRA

Branding experts say a good way to keep your story front of mind each day is by creating a brand mantra. Usually comprised of three words or short phrases that define the essence of your brand or company, the brand mantra is an internal communication tool under which all aspects of branding should be aligned.

Examples of brand mantras include:

GATEWAY COMPUTERS:

- **Inviting** A welcoming, comfortable and communal atmosphere.
- **Energizing** An exciting place that makes one feel creative and productive.
- **Educational** A playful, interactive experience that promotes learning.

OMAHA STEAKS:

- **Premium** Omaha Steaks’ quality inspires me to create great meals for my family and friends.
- **Pantry** The store experience reminds me of the pantry in my home. [The store has a complete supply of related products, and I know just where to find everything.]
- **Convenient** Shopping here makes it easier to plan my family’s meal program.

DISNEY:

- **Fun Family Entertainment**

STARBUCKS:

- **Rewarding Everyday Moments**

(Sources: “Built for Growth: Expanding Your Business Around the Corner or Across the Globe” by Arthur Rubinfeld and Collins Hemingway and “A New Brand World” by Scott Bedbury)