

Mind the Gap: Are you bridging your external and internal branding?

By Laura Pasternak

Mind the gap. You've seen it on tee shirts. Perhaps you've heard this British proper announcement on the London tube. But have you considered the importance of minding the gap between your internal and external branding efforts? If you haven't, prospects, clients and shareholders could very easily be get caught in the gap between brand promise and delivery.

No matter how brilliant your external brand communications, if the brand promise isn't validated through your internal efforts then it could all be for naught. By creating, implementing and maintaining consistency, you will build a stronger brand and, in the process, instill greater trust and customer loyalty.

The Pitfalls of Not Minding the Gap

Not heeding the gap can spell disaster for a company. All too often the focus of brand building is external – the sales force, marketing collateral and public relations efforts – with little attention given to internal brand touch points – company policies, practices, customer relationship management and employee protocol. Managing your brand both *internally* and *externally* is critical to creating a successful brand. When customers see a gap between what you tout and what you deliver, the mixed messages can have an adverse effect on your brand.

Brand is influenced by every contact you have with your customer. Does your customer's experience with your product support team align with your company's brand message? Is the experience created by the sales representative mirrored in the execution of the service? Does your collections department communicate the same brand attributes in their interactions with customers? Examine the consistency of your message, tone and action among all internal and external customer contacts. Chances are you'll find some sort of gap. Effective brand-driven companies focus on closing this gap.

But even some of today's most well-known brands face the challenge of effectively minding the gap. One high-profile example was internet service provider, America Online (AOL). On its corporate website, America Online (AOL) stated its commitment to creating an easy and painless experience for customers:

"We do all these things and much more because at AOL, we are dedicated to the simple premise that our members and consumers deserve the best possible – and most valuable – online experience available anywhere."

However, allegations among the company's customers suggested that AOL's external branding was not consistent with the company's internal operations. The web site, consumeraffairs.com, revealed AOL users' discontent with several of the company's

policies and practices, citing extreme difficulty in canceling accounts, rude customer service representatives, unauthorized charges and even double billing.

If you reread the above corporate vision statement, there is clearly a disconnect between the message and the experiences of customers who posted complaints at ConsumerAffairs.com. This is a classic example of how actual practices fail to support a company's marketing rhetoric. AOL's message said their customers deserved the best experience (rhetoric). However, delayed cancellation techniques, antagonistic, and often difficult, attitudes of some customer service representatives and frustrating cancellation problems (actual practices) contradicted the company's promotional language.

As a result, customers were canceling their AOL accounts by the thousands, with statistics showing 800,000 cancellations in one quarter alone. Nearly 4,000 former users wrote ConsumerAffairs.com about problems with AOL and difficulties in canceling services. One former customer went so far as to record and post on the Internet his [conversation](#) with AOL customer service, further compounding the negative perceptions about the AOL brand.

The company responded with this statement:

"At AOL, we have zero tolerance for customer care incidents like this -- which is deeply regrettable and also absolutely inexcusable," said AOL spokesman Nicholas Graham. "The employee in question violated our customer service guidelines and practices, and everything that AOL believes to be important in customer care," he said.

Despite the company's self-proclaimed "zero tolerance" for such incidents, the public perception that this was not an isolated incident didn't garner much sympathy for the company or positively support the company's desired brand position. Obviously, there had become a widening gap between AOL's internal and external brand management efforts.

Minding the Gap, Maintaining the Bridge

The above example demonstrates that even when you *think* there are no gaps between your internal and external branding, both require ongoing review, maintenance and careful management. Even with "strong safeguards" and "rigorous internal and external compliance methods" in place to help mind the gap, the reality is it could happen to any of us.

Brand management in an ongoing process that must be adopted by your entire organization. The key to ensuring you deliver on your brand promise is to empower your employees to be brand ambassadors. Have them participate in the process of establishing brand guidelines that identify how the company's brand is actualized at each touch point with a customer (from the initial sale through delivery and ongoing

support). Then, on a continual basis, implement and monitor checks and balances to identify and close any gaps between your brand promise and brand delivery.

What can you do to ensure that you don't become the next news story? Here are some practical tips for minding the gap:

- **Align your internal operational practices with your external brand message.** From the president and CEO to the customer service representative or maintenance person, *every* employee must understand, articulate and implement that brand consistently. They must recognize that their actions and interactions with customers are what create the value of the brand. They must be brand ambassadors in everything they do. Forgo this crucial step and contradictions between your brand and how your employees deliver on it will create doubt in prospects' minds as well as in those of your customers, partners, shareholders and the public.
- **Measure and monitor customer experiences.** In essence, we don't know what we don't know. That's why measurement and customer feedback is critical to managing your brand. Whatever you promise to deliver to the customer, you must ensure that the measures are in place to monitor customers' perceptions of your delivery on that promise. AOL wanted their clients to have the best experience possible, yet the actions of its customer service representatives challenged that premise. By instituting measures for feedback, as well as establishing internal checks and balances, you can ensure that you deliver on your brand promise and close any potential gaps that could erode the trust and loyalty of your customers.
- **Be objective when minding the gap.** It's human nature to want to play up our strengths and downplay or ignore our weaknesses. But examining our Achilles' heel is as essential as understanding what we do right. The best way to do this is to be as objective as possible. Allow customers and vendors to give you essential feedback, even if it is negative. And, instill a sense of self-regulation in your employees. Proactively addressing customer-identified brand gaps will pay off tenfold.
- **Walk a mile in their shoes.** Selling in the field with the sales force, sitting at the customer service help desk or working the warehouse dock for a day, will give you a better understanding of where your company excels in delivering on its brand as well as where it is falling short. By understanding the intricacies of the interactions various functions have with your customers, you can help establish the procedures and measures for ongoing assessment and management of your brand.

- **Motivate your employees to build and maintain the brand.** Plain and simple, if your employees have a vested interest in the brand process, they are far more likely to uphold the company values and brand. They must understand the importance of their role and be motivated to act with the brand in mind at all times. Have employees work together to establish the framework for how they will embody the brand and then implement a plan to get all employees on board. Publicly recognizing employees for brand-driven actions or solutions is one way to begin to build brand into the culture of your organization.

Like anything else, your brand is only as strong as your weakest link. If that weakest link is the bridge between your internal and external branding efforts, then your brand won't be sustainable. By instituting checks and balances and consistently reevaluating them, the link between your company and your customers can become a powerful and lasting connection.

Don't let your clients, shareholders, partners or the public fall through the cracks. Mind the gap by building and maintaining a solid bridge between your external brand message and your internal processes for delivering on that brand message. By doing so, you strengthen the commitment and loyalty of your customers, in turn strengthening your bottom line.

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