

Brand Beyond Marketing

by Laura Pasternak

Imagine you are about to embark on a trip of a lifetime. You've received brochures for a luxury resort. The rooms are lavish; the grounds impeccable. Photos of the restaurant's signature dishes look delectable. You're sold.

You go to the hotel. The room is musty and a tad dirty. The food is barely passable. Service is brusque and spotty at best. When you complain to management, you're met with indifference, or worse, silence. You leave disillusioned and disgusted. For all the resort's slick marketing, they've fallen woefully short.

Branding goes well beyond marketing. It will not be successful without ensuring that all aspects of your business reflect and support your intended brand. One of your most valuable assets—your people—must be well-trained in articulating and delivering on your brand. This step is particularly important for service organizations that don't have concrete products. Their offerings are soft assets like knowledge, experience and people.

When employees don't deliver the brand, it can be the kiss of death for a business. Don't believe me? Visit a hotel review web site like TripAdvisor.com. Peruse travelers' comments and you'll likely come across more than a few who cite poor customer service for their negative hotel reviews. Conversely, employees who represent the brand flawlessly and consistently can propel a business to stardom.

Brand: The Sum of All Its Parts

Despite what many believe, brand isn't about your logo, tagline and glossy brochure. Instead, a strong brand integrates multiple components, all of them necessary, including customer interactions, employee communications, corporate philosophy and advertising/marketing efforts. Your brand extends to your employees, customers, the media and even the general public as the above story illustrates. If these components don't consistently reinforce your brand, customers will become dissatisfied. The negative impact of their perception, should they voice their opinions to other potential customers or even the media, could have a ripple effect on your business. This can erode your brand equity and create misperceptions about your company in the market, that in turn could lead prospective customers, employees and investors to pass on your organization.

On the other hand, brand consistency throughout all levels of the organization helps drive an organization to grow and prosper. Strong brands can drive an increase in sales. The company is better suited to attract and retain the best employees. Vendors can see value in your brand and look to establish partnerships with your business, while investors will see the business and your brand equity as a valuable commodity.

Branding Through Your Employees

Your employees are one of the most critical touch points for your customer. Here are several steps to ensure that they are representing your brand in the best light possible.

- **Develop a Company Philosophy.**

A thoughtfully planned philosophy that guides how your company operates is the first step to reinforcing your brand among your workforce. The prestigious Ritz Carlton Hotel Company is an excellent example. They have created the following five "Gold Standards" for their business operations that reinforce the brand and detail an employee's role in delivering on this brand:

- 1) A vision to revolutionize hospitality in America by creating a luxury setting for guests and a credo that states the company's commitment to the genuine care and comfort of its guests.
- 2) A motto that exemplifies the level of service for its guests: *We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.*
- 3) Three Steps of Service:
 - a) A warm and sincere greeting that uses the guest name, if and when possible
 - b) Anticipation and compliance with guest needs, and
 - c) A fond farewell that uses a guest's name, if and when possible.
- 4) "20 Basics" that outline the responsibilities and expectations for how the company delivers on its service (including #13—Never Lose a Guest).
- 5) The Employee Promise ("At The Ritz-Carlton, our Ladies & Gentlemen are the most important resource in our service commitment to our guests.").

- **Maintain Brand Consistency.**
This step is essential to building a strong brand. However, it is often one of the first steps to unravel. You must establish consistency throughout all aspects of your organization. But setting the standards is not enough. You must constantly evaluate your actions. Establish checkpoints for each aspect of the business that interacts with customers and the general public. Ensure that each employee is empowered to identify and address inconsistencies in your brand. Fail to deliver on brand with one customer, and he or she might forget. Fail to do so for another, and he or she might not be so forgiving. It only takes a scant few to dispel the brand you are touting.
- **Practice What You Preach.**
The best way to lead is by example. If your brand projects your organization as one which supports its employees and then reneges on that promise, your brand (and sales) will suffer. Case in point: Wal-Mart. The company says, "We believe that one of the keys to our success is our people and how we treat them." However, the retail chain has been the subject of unfair employee wage practice lawsuits. Moreover, though they say they value their target customer (the hard working middle class) their actions aren't necessarily consistent with the rhetoric.
- **Implement Brand Guidelines.**
In order to ensure brand consistency, your organization must establish a framework or set of brand guidelines for all to follow. We're not merely talking about logo or corporate identity guidelines, but actual **brand guidelines** that communicate the company's brand positioning statement, key messages, core values, brand attributes, measures of success and processes for handling customer issues or feedback. Federal Express was an early pioneer in this idea. The international shipper utilizes an Internet-based program which outlines the company's brand guidelines. This detailed approach provides guidance on everything from the graphic standards for use of the company logo to how cultural differences affect brand (particularly important for global companies). Establishing brand guidelines leaves no room for misinterpretation and helps maintain consistency throughout all levels of the organization.

- **Understand and Address Cultural Differences.**

With advancements in technology, communications and the Internet, we are truly becoming a global economy. Considering cultural differences when building a brand is more important than ever, particularly if your business has international reach. Words and phrases in America might not translate to the same meaning in another country. What customers value and perceive as positive in the United States may be perceived radically different elsewhere. In the past, the United States was the model that all others wanted to emulate. That isn't necessarily the case today. Therefore, it is incumbent on corporations to ensure that their brands can transcend these cultural differences, if they are to have a greater geographical reach.

Brand extends well beyond your marketing efforts. Your brand is only as good as the people behind it...and the people in front of your customer. Take the time to effectively build a corporate culture that mirrors your brand. Train your employees to represent that brand. Evaluate your consistency in delivering your brand across all aspects of your business. In doing so, you will strengthen your brand equity and position your company for greater success.

Laura Pasternak is President of MarketPoint, LLC, a brand management firm that helps businesses improve results by identifying, integrating and managing customer-driven brand equities and strategies. Visit www.yourmarketpoint.com to learn more, or call 1.866.21POINT toll-free or 410.418.8490.