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**Brand Management Lessons
from the Gap Logo Debacle**
Who Should Control the Brand?

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Brand Management Lessons from the Gap Logo Debacle

On October 4, 2010, retail giant GAP quietly unveiled a new Gap brand logo on its website, and someone noticed.

In the seven days that followed, professional journalists, bloggers, fans and critics frothed the media with social commentary. Some called the move haphazard brand management, others a brilliantly conceived stunt to revive languishing sales. By midnight, October 11, the “new” logo was gone.

Any Port in a Storm

Like a Weather Channel reporter, company spokesperson Louise Callagy spent eight days standing between her public and a deadly storm. At first, she said the new logo signified Gap’s evolution from “classic, American design to modern, sexy, cool.” But Gap fans disagreed violently, describing the new mark as “horrible,” “ugly,” “childish,” and “clip-art.” Some fans even suggested GAP’s brand manager should be fired.



Abe Sauer of BrandChannel.com called the logo change “a prototypical brand panic move.”

Writing for BrandChannel.com, Abe Sauer said the logo change “demonstrates a prototypical brand panic move. With things not going in its favor, the brand decides to change the one valuable element it has going for it.”

By day three, Gap was running for cover, redefining the angry dialogues as “passionate debates.” Gap said it loved the new logo, but was interested in seeing other ideas. In an attempt to quell the furor, they hinted at a crowd sourcing project. But designers – at least the ones posting on Facebook – revolted. Gap’s well-intentioned crowd source initiative was interpreted as a “spec work stunt... completely appalling and beyond unethical!” Another “fan” said crowd sourcing was “completely insulting to the industry, and to [Gap’s] designer as well.” And a handful threatened to retaliate with a boycott. A small contingent of Gap fans, like Jamie Lyons, used their Facebook accounts to speak out, in support of Gap. “If this is a publicity stunt Gap, I say great job. If it’s not, I say great job.” And Taylor Wyant admonished his peers, saying, “suck it up and move on, it’s JUST a logo, it’s not like it’ll affect your life.”

By day seven, Gap relented. Marka Hansen, President of Gap Brand North America, issued a statement indicating the company would roll back the brand and resurrect the iconic blue box logo. The online community declared victory.

Publicity Stunt or Act of Desperation?

On October 12, just one day after Gap recalled the failed logo, critics were performing the post-mortem. Vanity Fair contributor Juli Weiner dismissed the whole affair with a mock obituary, claiming the logo died “after a brief and ignominious battle with stage IV banality.” Writing for Bloomberg, Ryan Flynn hinted that the change may have been connected to Gap CEO Glenn Murphy’s focus on reviving sales. Blogs and columns began to surface, claiming that the whole episode was nothing more than a media stunt.

Whatever the motive, Gap’s unexpected brand shift bears striking similarities to other companies’ failed attempts to breathe life into withering brands. Cable television and internet service provider Comcast rolled out the new Xfinity identity in February of this year, hoping to dissociate itself with its own reputation for poor customer service and high pricing. Last July, The SciFi Channel changed its name and logo mark to “SyFy,” in an attempt to better relate to its young audience, only to discover that “syfy” is a slang term for syphilis. In January of 2009, Tropicana Pure Premium Orange Juice abandoned its “straw-in-the-orange” brand symbol in favor of packaging which consumers labeled “generic-looking.” Parent company Pepsi, just one year earlier paid the same agency (Arnell/Omnicom) \$1 Million to develop a new Pepsi logo (whose only redeeming quality, in this writer’s opinion is that the white stripe, which widens as the calories increase with each product in the line, serves as a gentle reminder of the effect the product will have on consumer waistlines).

The Crux of the Matter

Whether Gap’s failed introduction of the “new” logo was a media stunt or a rebranding strategy, one thing is clear: the process lowered most observers’ opinions of Gap. Luckily for Gap, people have short memories.

But I think there’s a bigger issue on the table. Bigger than cause, and bigger than effect.

At the heart of this historic social media event is the question, “Should a company define its own brand, or should they allow their customers’ preferences to define their brand?” Of course, the simple answer is “yes.” Marketing experts have long recognized the importance of resonance with the market. Market research, audience segmentation, message mapping, surveys and focus groups all pay homage to the power of resonance. But a more accurate answer might be “the feedback of any audience should be understood in the context of the composition of the group of respondents, and weighed against the mission behind the issue in question.” Huh?



The heart of the issue: Should a company define its own brand, or should they allow their customers’ preferences to define their brand?

Social media like Facebook provide brand owners with powerful tools for communication – two-way communication. The sheer numbers of media like Facebook can be inspiring, intimidating, facilitating... and misleading, in two ways.

As marketers, we need to stay mindful of the effect that a representative sample has on our ability to project opinions of the sample group to the wider population, with validity. In Gap’s case, I suspect that feedback from the sample group who self-identify (by virtue of their Facebook membership, their “fan” status and their inclination to voice unsolicited opinions on issues they don’t control) might be representative of Gap’s target audience. I do not suspect, however, that all target audiences share these characteristics, and for that reason, I would encourage any brand owner to consider (and probably to proactively manage) selection into the sample group – especially when that sample group is contained in social media.

More importantly, a brand owner must understand the mission behind the brand, or in the case of a changing brand, behind the evolution of the brand. If, for example, an organization intends to lead by the power of its brand, then it would behoove that organization to act with the courage of its convictions – to do what it believes is right, regardless of feedback, and limited only by the impact that a backlash may have against its future ability to affect the change dictated by its mission. Or, to put it in the vernacular of the street, “You can’t lead by following.”

About the Author: Michael Zimmerman is Senior Marketing Strategist at MarketPoint LLC, a consulting firm providing honest, insightful and effective brand and marketing services for business-to-business, education, and non-profit organizations. Visit www.yourmarketpoint.com to learn more.



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