

Branding – it takes years to build and minutes to lose

By Philip Atkinson and Alastair Bruce.



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Just suppose you could control what others thought of you both personally and organisationally. If you knew you could not fail, what image or reputation would you want others to have of you and your business?

The secret is that you really do have a lot more control of your 'brand' than you may believe. Consciously and unconsciously, people make judgements and assessments all the time of how you conduct yourself, your manner, voice and tone, your attitudes, your behaviour and body language, your dress and how you position yourself personally and organisationally.

Can you think of any reason why you would not want to maximise a strong and positive image, and for that to be retained in the minds of those who are most important to your business? We are not talking here about clever 'logos', 'mission statements' or punchy 'one line' strap lines, but a genuine and authentic presence that instils in your clients and customers a strong belief that you are exactly the best person in your field for them to do business with.

Who would not commit to create that reality and take the necessary steps to do it?



Personal signature

Personally, when you enter a room, join a meeting, signal approval, shake hands, say farewell, you create energy in that scenario, whatever it may be - a board room, train station, airport arrival lounge, a bar or restaurant. When you meet someone for the first time, you have just a few seconds to make a good first impression and it's almost impossible ever to change it. So it is worth giving each new encounter your best shot.

It does not matter what you do in the commercial world, you send out a signature of who you are and what you stand for. You cannot, NOT communicate. Even if you say very little or even nothing at all, you are still in effect making a statement.

It is unlikely that any organisation will grow without recognising that 'branding' is essential to operate in the commercial world.

This is true for all organisations. The very presence of any form of business or organisation is based on one's very existence and how one communicates with those with whom you come into contact.

My (PA) first exposure to the concept was as a child listening to a TV advert and the tell-tale signature tune of 'mild green fairy liquid'. You can play the tune in your head right now and the image of a mother washing the family dishes still comes back to you even though the advert must have been running over 30 years ago. I guess that's where my fascination with branding first started and it has not diminished.



Strong brand values create profitability and growth

I seem to be attracted to work with companies with strong brand images. Over the years I have been very fortunate to work at senior board level with companies such as Diageo, Volkswagen, Lego, Royal Bank of Scotland, General Electric, Mortgage Express, Lloyds Bank, TI Group, Clydesdale Bank, CMG Logica, Gist Brocades, Stena Sealink etc.

One great benefit of working with such powerful brands is that you share in the pride of the employees. I remember as an example working with Diageo where everyone had pride in the brands they serviced, Johnny Walker, Gordon Gin, Smirnoff Vodka etc. The degree of commitment to protect brand values ran right the way through the business - just as much as the 300,000+ staff in General Electric have a pride in their huge range of companies and their dominance in many world markets. The same is true for high street retail stores such as Debenhams, M&S, Harvey Nichols and Boots among others.

Strong organisational values permeate positive brands

Strong brands have strong brand values, and strong resilient brands protect their brand from dilution by constantly reinventing how they communicate with their key stakeholders. You know with certainty that M&S values quality and customer focus. You know that British Airways focuses on delighting the customer. So it is not clever advertising or 'just do it' strap lines, it is actually built into the corporate culture.

Now we are going to raise some key issues in creating a strong brand. First, we will discuss the importance of personal branding and then extend this to the organisation. Phil Atkinson and Alastair Bruce, the authors, have added our contributions in this piece and would be happy to discuss how you could use this information for both your personal presentation and your commercial undertakings in a larger organisation.



'Brand you'

I have always focused on 'interpersonal influence' for the simple reason that, to achieve any result, you have to work through people, and communication is central to working with others.

I would contend that most people could improve their communication skills quite radically. Many rely on their default style and do not focus enough on improving their personal performance. For instance, the number of times attendees on my 'presentation skills' sessions are surprised when they see and hear video and audio feedback on how they have responded in taped role plays. "Oh my goodness – I don't sound like that, do I?" or "I did not realise how little I smile" or "I never thought I was so quiet." It is enlightening to "see ourselves as others see us".

We all leave a signature, and the key to understanding that signature is to start asking "what is it that marks me out as an individual?" It's all about who am I and what is my identity? This is not

be confused with your work mask – rather what is your identify – who are you and what do you want to be, do and have as a person?

Many people go through life without answering that question. They get pulled in different directions by their family, their partner, their career, their employers and the competing demands of others. Not everyone carves out the life they truly want – but those who do tend to have done three things.

Focus, energy and alignment

People who live their dream have a strong focus on what they want to be, do and have. They realise that if they are not moving towards "being, doing and having," then they are moving further away. They truly know what they want. Having a road map is not the only

thing – they also need the passion or energy to fuel the drive.

This means they have to make sacrifices when they make choices about how they spend their time. They manage their time to achieve the best results – by prioritising and taking action. People do succeed when they make a decision and take action. Without decisions, there is no progress to report on either personally or organisationally.

Finally, they align their resources to fit neatly with their conscious action plan. These people are not "waiting to be discovered". They are taking action and taking responsibility for shaping their future to turn out to be the way they want it.

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Values drive behaviour

Aligned people are clear about their identity, their beliefs and values. They do what they value and they value what they do. They recognise that strong beliefs are what create action in others and ensure that their attitudes and behaviours are congruent with whom they want to become.

Most importantly, they really understand their own personality, drivers and motives and understand that only by working with others and supporting the goals of others will they in return attain their goals.

So, as a brand – they are secure in the knowledge and confident that the actions they take will take them closer to the life they want to live.

Organisational branding

Using exactly the same model we agree that an organisation's identity is sculpted around the triad of focus, energy and alignment. That, hopefully, is what strategic and business planning is all about. We work very closely with companies and organisations to ensure that this becomes a reality.

However, as individuals we work and live in communities with others and only through cooperative behaviour do we achieve anything. In a similar fashion as a business organisation – only through interacting with our stakeholders, our staff, customers or consumers, suppliers, regulatory bodies and other groupings can we achieve our results.

What's it like to receive our behaviour?

This is a self-reflective question that more organisations should ask of themselves. What is it like to interact with us as an organisation? How would others describe that interaction? Would it be a pleasant or painful experience? What do our key stakeholders, customers and users say about us?

Knowing how our identity is received is paramount to building a strong brand. Knowing how to measure current performance and communicate with our key stakeholders is what brand integrity is all about. It is about building communication channels and fuelling them with high added value for our stakeholders in the same way that individuals form positive relationships with others.

There are a myriad of activities which can support your brand – whether the organisation is a college, retailer, hospital or bank.

Tailored branding solutions

Branding starts with serious research to discover how your organisation communicates with its stakeholders and focuses on all 'delivery channels' and interactions with customers and others – from customer service, order taking, sales, account management and servicing the larger supply chain.

In a relatively short period of time, diagnostics with customers and others can be completed and the client can then decide how to proceed. Solutions are tailored specifically for each customer and stakeholder for each channel.

Review: personal and organisational branding

There are many similarities between personal and organisational branding and effective branding is deliberately conscious in both contexts. Either personally or organisationally, the key is 'identity' and the issue of what do we want to do, be and have and how well we are currently achieving our goals. Working on consistently examining the gap between 'current' and 'desired' identity, we strengthen the brand.

Once the brand is established we continually need to seek feedback on interaction with others and develop several strategies to build and maintain strong brand values. Large companies recognise that their competitive edge is founded on strong brand values and a consistent and ethical image with their public. Huge resources are channelled to protect the brand and the business.

Some of the most talented staff focus on 'brand management' and the skills required include an innate curiosity to examine self and business and devise new ways to understand ourselves as others see us. In increasingly competitive times the brand is incredibly important. It can take years to build a brand and minutes to lose it. Being vigilant and self-critical are two useful behaviours that those who are guardians of the brand need to display at all times. ♦

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