

How corporate
branding principles
can help you
stand out

Brand

Aid

The Cure
for the
“Common”
Image

by Laurie Brown

On a bright fall Saturday, I went to see my nephew play rugby with his University of Michigan team. I had never seen the game before and was moved by its amazing energy. In fact, the sport seemed to be two parts persistence and one part insanity. I learned that these young men practiced daily, either as a team or individually to prepare themselves for 80 minutes of play. In addition to brute force and endurance, I also saw the intelligence needed to succeed in this non-stop game. After the game, as I was sipping hot cider and waiting for my nephew to join me, one of the players who had scored three goals walked by wearing a t-shirt that read “Good enough ... never is.” I made a decision about that young man on the spot: He was the kind of person I would want working for me.

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At first blush you may think, “Wow, that’s a mighty big judgment to make from simply reading a t-shirt.” You could be right. I never met this young man, never spoke to him, and no one told me anything about him. But, I already had some data. I had witnessed the persistence of the players on the team. I knew they worked hard everyday to become better players. I knew they were all students at the University of Michigan (“The leaders and the best” according to the U of M fight song.) And even though all the members of the team were clearly bright, dedicated, hard-working young men, he stood out. It wasn’t just that he clearly loved the game, they all did. But he had something extra that set him apart from his teammates. Wearing the slogan on his shirt was the same as carrying a huge sign reading, “I am the one who will settle for nothing less than my personal best!” The words he wore on his chest became his personal brand image.

Corporations understand the importance of brand image better than anyone else. Today’s business leaders know that in this very competitive marketplace it is more critical than ever to differentiate themselves from their competition. Success depends on being visible — standing out and above the crowd. Managing their brand allows them to get attention and gain a hold on the hearts and minds of their customers.

What exactly is a brand image? It is simply the emotional reaction and attachment that a customer has to their total experience with a company, product or service. Since there has been so much emphasis on branding lately, you may be thinking, “Brand, shmand, it’s just the flavor of the month.” I disagree. Here’s an exercise that

may help you understand the value of brand. Think about a product or company to whom you are loyal. Is it Sony, Nike, McDonalds, Craftsman Tools or a local restaurant? Then ask yourself – why am I loyal to them? My guess is that your answer is connected to the fact that they offer you a good experience that is both different from their competitors and provides you with what you want. A company's product or service needs to be consistent, relevant and distinctive in order to be successful. Their consistent quality, relevance to customer needs and distinction from the competition creates a positive brand image that resides in the hearts and minds of those that do business with them. Companies may create dynamic slogans such as “Just do it” and “The real thing” to attract your attention, but as a consumer you have the final say as to whether or not they have earned your loyalty. You decide if they have the attributes that matter to you. In actuality, you own their brand image.

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Your judgments about brands are created in your heart and mind in the same way you make other decisions. Your brain is much like a computer, constantly collecting, sorting, and filing data. But there's more. Based on experience, opinion and sometimes even peer pressure, you gather input with all your senses and form opinions based on that input. For example, think about the last time you shopped for a peach at your local grocery store. How did you select the specific peach you bought? You probably looked at it to see if it had good color, shape and no bruises. Perhaps you felt it, to see if the fruit was soft and ripe. Maybe you even checked to see if it smelled like a peach. You probably compared it to the other peaches. All of this data was instantly turned into an impression of the value of the peach. You decided, “This is the peach for me.” Then you bought it, took it home and tasted it. If it was as sweet and juicy as you had anticipated, the unstated promise was kept.

As a customer, you grow to trust what is in essence a company's “brand promise.” A brand promise is what, through advertising and/or experience, you have grown to expect from the company. My son, Daniel, loves drinking Coke. On trips abroad while I was conducting sales training, he was delighted to find that the Coke in Thailand and Japan tastes exactly like the Coke from the 7-11 near our house. Although the packaging was different, the product was identical. Coke keeps its brand promise by offering the same quality taste experience around the world.

This kind of relevant, distinctive consistency benefits both the customer and the company. When experience has given you trust in the “promise,” you are more likely to purchase the product in the future without hesitation. It also means you are more likely to try other products and services the company offers. This trust turns you into a loyal customer. In addition, if there should ever be a big problem with the product or service (think Tylenol scare), you are more inclined to trust their ability to address the problem and quicker to forgive them. Customers tend to remain loyal to companies that consistently deliver on their brand promise. This demonstrates the tremendous power of brand images for companies, products and services.

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But, you may be thinking that as an individual, how can I make use of brand imaging? How can I harness the power

of brand to help me stand out from the crowd – to demonstrate the value I add?

A personal brand allows you the same benefits it can provide to companies. Your personal brand image is what you represent; what you stand for in the hearts and minds of others. It is not posing, pretending or posturing. It is not about fooling people into thinking you are someone else. It is about who you are every day, consistently, and who you are working to become.

By now I hope you are wondering where can I get my personal brand image and what does it take to create one? Well, you already have a personal brand image! In fact, you’ve always had one. Go back to the days when you were in grade school — perhaps you were the class clown, or the pretty one, or the smart one. You had an image, a brand. And your teachers, consciously or unconsciously, for better or worse, promoted that image when you moved on to the next grade. They probably told your next teacher “Watch out for Jeff, he’s a talker,” or “You will love having Tasha in your class. She’s a really hard worker.” This brand image stuck with you unless or until, through hard work or maybe by switching schools, you were able to change it. But even though sometimes your behavior may have completely changed, perception of your brand image may linger long after you actually stopped living your old “brand promise.”

Just as with corporations, you don’t “own” your brand image; your brand lives in the hearts and minds of those who observe you or interact with you. Even though you are

not the owner of your brand, you can make simple choices everyday that will either sustain your old brand image or help you build a new one.

As you attempt to manage your personal brand image, it helps to remember that just like the rest of us, you make split-second decisions about the world and the people you come in contact with. While you are taking in data and forming opinions about the people around you, others are doing the same about you. The way you dress, what your business card says, your tone of voice, your body language, your work ethic and the words you use all help form mini-impressions in the hearts and minds of others. These impressions are brand touchpoints, and collectively they form your brand image. You want to be aware and responsive to how your everyday actions create the impressions others have of you, so you can constantly shape your brand.

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Only by taking ownership of the fact that your actions and choices are the basis of how people perceive you, can you start to manage and refine your personal brand image. You are ready to cure your common image. Regardless of where you are in the development of your image, there are four simple steps to creating, recreating, or enhancing a positive brand image.

Create It Check It Write It Live It

As we work through these steps, I will use the generic term “customer.” If you are in sales or service, the term will have a traditional meaning for you. For the purposes of this exercise, the term “customer” will have a broader meaning: it can refer to an employee, a boss, a coworker, a family member or a friend. In short your customer is anyone you are trying to impact and you may be “selling” in a variety of ways. So when reading this, I encourage you to translate the word “customer” to mean the individual you are trying to impress or persuade.

“What is genius — but the power of expressing a new individuality.”

— ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Create It

As you begin to create or reshape your brand image, you need to consider the following: Who is your customer? What does your customer need? What unique qualities do you offer your customer? Remember, successful brands need to be relevant, distinctive and consistent.

Sit down with paper and pencil and answer the following four questions as honestly as you can:

1. What do you know about your customer?

- a. Why do you want to reach this customer?
- b. What special insight do you have about them?
- c. What are their wants and needs?

2. What do you know about yourself?

- a. What are your strengths?
- b. What are your weaknesses?
- c. Are you able to meet or exceed the customer’s wants and needs?

3. What do you know about your competition?

- a. What are their strengths?
- b. What are their weaknesses?
- c. Are they able to meet or exceed the customer’s wants and needs?

This exercise helps you compare how you and your competition meet the needs of the customer and what unique value you provide. Once you are clear about your unique offering, you can more effectively communicate the difference in value you can provide your customer.

4. What makes you different?

Your differences may be obvious to you. On the other hand, perhaps you may feel that

nothing you do sets you apart; you do your job every day and even though you do it well, you may not see what you do as anything special. Remember that everyone is like a snowflake and the combination of all that makes you who you are in the world is truly unique. Here's an exercise to help you recognize the qualities that reflect your uniqueness and set you apart.

a. Write a list of your personal passions. What do you love doing? (Is it interior design, teaching, art, music, golfing, football, reading, travel? Don't worry about whether or not it is work related.)

b. What are your skills and talents? (Are you perceptive, spontaneous, theatrical, detail-oriented, organized — do you speak other languages? Again, don't limit these only to your work).

c. Write a list of your personal traits. (Perhaps you are punctual. Or are you a “people person”. Are you optimistic, open minded, curious, determined, spiritual, or team oriented?)

Remember what you learned about your customer in the first part of this exploration. Now take a look at your list of characteristics from your customer's point of view. How can your passions, personal traits, skills and talents meet your customer's wants and needs? At first you may have to give this some serious thought, but things will fall into place.

How can your passions, personal traits, skills and talents meet your customer's wants and needs?

If you were to look at my list of passions, you would see “baking.” Granted, no one has ever hired me as a consultant because I make a great chocolate cake. Let's look in detail at what makes me a great baker: I follow the recipe exactly, use only the best ingredients and take my time to make sure it is perfect. So how does this relate to my brand with my customers? These same qualities that make me a great baker, translate into how I do my job for my clients. They illustrate that I am a person who follows directions, who has high quality standards and is willing to put in the time and effort to achieve the best results. I may not be hired for my baking skills, but I bring these same qualities to each of my customers.

Bruce's talents and skills include, "avid, talented fisherman." Of course, no one has hired him because he can endure a whole day hip deep in cold water, catching rainbow trout, but if you look at his talents from his customers point of view, Bruce's patience and ability to focus on long term goals are skills that are very valuable.

When Wendy tried to compile a list of personal traits, she couldn't see how being a stay-at-home mom with three kids would be of value outside the home. Once she recognized the traits and talents that made her successful in her home, she was able to see herself more clearly. She realized that she was able to juggle multiple schedules, the ongoing demands of her family, organize a hectic, crazy household and make it run like clockwork — all while keeping her humor and grace. When she looked at these traits from her customer's point of view, she could see how her energy, good humor and organizational skills could be of value in the workplace.

Now that you've looked at your list from your customers' point of view, cull it down to the most consistent, relevant and distinctive items. Then write down as many behaviors as you can think of that support each listed item. For instance if you say, "Customer focused", you might list:

Always on time

Good listening skills

Will go the extra mile

The items on your list become the basis of your brand promise. You may decide to change them after you have had others check your list and give you a reality check.

"You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do."

— HENRY FORD

Check It

Sometimes it's hard to be accurate and objective in trying to evaluate yourself. Take your list and have others (trusted family members, friends, colleagues or well-established customers) look at your list. Make sure they are people who are willing to be completely honest with you. What do they think was missing from your list? Do they

agree with everything you wrote? If there are points of disagreement, discuss them. Ask for feedback. Ask these individuals if they believe you are fulfilling your “promise?” If the answer is yes, great! If the answer is no, ask where your behaviors deviate from your list. If your behavior is not consistent with your promise, you are undermining your personal brand image. Based on the feedback you receive, either revise your list of behaviors to align with how others see you, or determine the actions you need to take to consistently fulfill your brand promise.

“I can’t stress enough the importance of a strong, concise brand statement. It is the cornerstone of any successful product. Without a winning brand position, a product will drift aimlessly in a highly competitive, highly focused, cutthroat market.”

— STU FINE, VICE PRESIDENT, ALBERTO-CULVER

Write It

Now you have a realistic brand image based on your understanding of your customer’s needs and wants. Your next assignment is to formulate your brand promise. The promise should let customers know about the character and personality of your brand and why it is of value to them. Write a one or two sentence statement that communicates clearly what you stand for — the distinguishing quality that sets you apart. This statement should include your unique skills, personality and passions, and how they add value to your customer.

When asked to do this assignment, Kelly wrote that she is “a personable, accountable team player who focuses on the details so the customer looks good.”

Joel stated that he is “a confident, knowledgeable, loyal project engineering manager who places great importance on finding innovative ways to apply his knowledge while mentoring his employees to give his company a competitive edge.”

Manny said he “is a collegial, cooperative, team facilitator who works to build consensus among his staff.”

Write your promise on a 3x5 card and, if possible, laminate it. Refer to it everyday. Carry it with you or tape it to your mirror, where you’ll see it every day.

“What you do speaks so loudly ... I can’t hear what you say.”

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Live It

More important than creating a brand statement is ensuring all of your behaviors support your brand image. To promote your personal brand image externally, you could shout it from the rooftops, buy a billboard, buy a banner ad or record a radio commercial. That may get your message heard, but everyone knows that saying it doesn’t make it so. The most effective long-term way to promote your personal brand image is to live it on a day-to-day basis. Consistency is the secret. You must be the embodiment of your brand.

Top 5 Personal Brand Touchpoints

You touch your customer in a variety of ways. Every contact you have with your customer is a touchpoint. This is true whether the contact is face to face or from afar. Because every touchpoint affects personal brand image, you want to constantly be aware of how your actions affect your personal brand. At the beginning of each day look at your card and ask yourself, “Is what I did yesterday living up to my brand promise? If not, what changes do I need to make?”

Check each of the following areas every day to see if your behavior supports or undermines your brand promise.

- 1. How you look** (clothing, hairstyle, grooming accessories, etc.)
- 2. How you communicate** (body language, eye contact, tone of voice, speech, etc.)
- 3. What you do** (reliability, punctuality, consistency, courtesy, etc.)
- 4. What you know** (experience, education, research, job history, etc.)
- 5. How you reach out** (phone calls, Facebook, business cards, e-mail, advertising, etc.)

Remember, everyday you have the ability to either support your current brand or diminish its power. Make the most of the opportunities to enhance what and who you are. In researching this topic I looked for synonyms for the word “brand.” Among them was the word “mark”; which means “to produce an imprint on something.” As in “Mark the trail, so that we can find our way back.” Isn’t that what we hope to accomplish with our brands? We need to be so relevant, consistent and memorable that we leave a well marked trail so our customers will easily find their way back to us.



Laurie Brown has over two decades of experience as a trainer, coach and speaker, helping her audience improve their presentation, communication and customer service skills. In that time she has earned a reputation as a highly engaging, fun and effective professional, whose work gets results for her clients.

A key asset that Laurie brings to her work is her range and depth of experience. She has an international clientele, having worked on four continents and numerous countries including the UK, Panama, Japan, Mexico, Germany, Spain, Australia, Bahrain, Thailand, and throughout the United States and Canada. Laurie has worked with culturally diverse audiences at all corporate levels, and her clients have included Fortune 500 companies, government agencies and small family-owned businesses. Her clients include Accenture, IBM, KPMG, Great American Insurance, Ford Motor Company, Salesforce, Blackberry, and Bayer among many others.

Laurie is passionate about providing engaging training and coaching that makes a difference. She is the author of *The Greet Your Customer Manual* and *The Teleprompter Manual*.



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