

Branding from the Outside In

by

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I've been a copywriter for more than 20 years. I also have a blog called "Making Sense: e-Digest of Brand Thinking." Much of my time has been spent writing annual reports for fortune 500 companies like Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, Polo Ralph Lauren, Eastman Chemical, and Newell Rubbermaid—to name but a few.

The nice thing about writing annual reports for those companies is that you get to interact with them at a pretty high level, often at the CEO level. So in the process, you get to learn a lot about their branding strategy. Or lack thereof.

Whenever you discuss branding, the first thing you need to have is a unique point of view. Then you need a unique name for that point of view. I call mine:

"Branding From the Outside In"

When you think about it, brands are a lot like our children. We dress them up, feed them well, fix their teeth and when the time is right, send them out into the world, hoping they will be successful.

In a sense, you are positioning them for success. But the truth is, their success depends more on how the "outside" world perceives them, than on how you want them to be perceived.

Scott Bedbury, Former CMO of Starbucks, described a brand in his book *A Brand New World* as "the sum of the good, the bad, the ugly and the off-strategy." [Brands] become psychological concepts held in the minds of the public, where they may stay forever. As such, you can't entirely control a brand. At best, you only guide and influence it." Sort of like, if you love your brand, let it go.

"The Starbucks brand's core identity was less about engineering a great cup of coffee than about providing a great coffee experience." And there you have it. That's what "outside-in" branding is all about—recognizing and understanding that the customer experience (what lies outside of your brand) is what shapes it the most. This is true whether you're selling railcars or fresh flowers.

In a typical marketing scenario, brand communications normally go one way—from the brand to the customer. It's the field of dreams strategy: if we say it, they will believe it.

There's a new Walgreen's drug store a few blocks from my house. It's a lot more convenient than my old drugstore, so I began using it.

Walgreen's is aggressively positioning itself as a national brand retailer. They began national advertising in 2002, and are spending around \$360mm a year to convince consumers that Walgreens is the perfect, convenient answer to an imperfect world. Their tagline: "That's life. This is Walgreens."

Unfortunately, the Walgreen's image I carry around in my head is not as favorable as Walgreen's would like it to be. Because from my customer experience, Walgreen's isn't "convenient," it is "inept." They prove that to me on practically every visit I make to their pharmacy. Prescriptions are partially filled because they run out of pills, which means I have to come back. Some prescriptions are overlooked altogether. And the staff of baby pharmacists they hire look at you weirdly because you don't fit into their model of how a perfect pharmacy customer should act.

So if "brand positioning" no longer accurately reflects customers' needs, or economic or market realities, what does? According to Nick Wreden, international brand consultant and author of *Fusion Brand—wikification*.

A wiki is a collaborative web site that can be quickly edited and changed by its visitors using simple formatting rules. It's a derivative of wiki-wiki, the Hawaiian word for "quick."

In branding, wikification is one of the ways by which customers define and shape brands based on the economic, experiential or emotional value they receive. Wikification is constantly occurring— on feedback sites, blogs, message boards, viral emails, water-cooler chat, and other peer-to-peer conversations. These networked "conversations" are powerful. One Nike-related site has received more than 3.5 million posts about sneakers. That's a lot of wikification.

According to Wreden, message-board feedback led Continental Airlines to create a customer service help desk exclusively for its top customers. Put simply, wikification can help make or break a brand.

Arby's roast beef is a good example of the former. They've introduced a new customer-focused branding campaign that is creating buzz in the quick service restaurant industry.

Arby's is headquartered in Atlanta, so I sat down with their VP of brand communications, Debra Mager, to learn more about their new branding strategy.

Arby's was at a crossroads in 2004. They needed to make the right decisions to strengthen their brand's future and generate more momentum. Up to that point, their de facto brand identity was a talking oven mitt — something to which Arby's patrons and Arby's franchisees found hard to relate.

To Arby's and their agency, Merkley + Partners, the task was clear. They must understand not only who their core customers are, but also what those customers need. It wasn't so much about selling food as it was about giving customers the choices they wanted. In the end, Arby's recognized that the consumer—and not Arby's—is redefining what quality food is.

Out of all of this comes a major re-branding campaign with a new customer-centric theme line: "I'm Thinking Arby's."

In the new Arby's TV spots, that line is paired with a neon Arby's hat that pops up above people's heads like an "I've-got-an-idea" light bulb. The campaign was designed to speak to heavy fast-food users. It's a successful example of branding from the outside in.

Wikification can also hurt a brand. Take Maytag, for example. For 34 years the Maytag repairman (the loneliest repairman on earth) helped Maytag build brand value. Then, Maytag introduced its new flagship washer—the Neptune. It was a disaster. The washer developed mold and the motor was fond of conking out. There weren't enough hours in the day for the Maytag repairman to fix all the problems.

The issue culminated with a class action suit against Maytag. Wikification played a major role in bringing that about. One weblog I visited, "A View from Elsewhere," has 125 posts about the suit—all from angry Neptune owners.

Okay—enough about Arby's and Maytag. Let's talk about how your clients (or company) can benefit from outside-in branding. First, we have to recognize that some clients won't get it—and still others may get it but see no immediate value in it. These are the clients who are only comfortable when they are talking to themselves.

Of course, it's understood that **you** get it. So, what can you do to help enlighten your clients? Probably the best thing is to become a reflection of the target audience and back up your ideas with a little research. Nothing sells ideas better than research. I'm not talking about anything elaborate or expensive here, just some off-the-cuff things you can do yourself.

For instance:

1. You can become a "mystery shopper," just by visiting a few of your client's locations.
2. You can do a little web research on the company, industry and market and flow it in to a simple presentation
3. You can visit some relevant blogs and get the pro's and con's of your client's company.
4. You can conduct a few brief phone interviews with your client's customers.

One last thing: research, no matter how simple it is, can sometimes lead you to a branding disconnect. For example, if the client's brand promise stresses "fast delivery" and your impromptu research shows that customers are fed up with *late deliveries*—you can do one of two things:

1. Urge your client to change the brand promise to link up more with customers' experience, i.e. "the slowest delivery in town"
2. Or urge your client the change customers' experience to match the promise, i.e. "the fastest delivery in town"

You choose.
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