

Brand new

By Stuart White
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I have been discussing branding a new business with some colleagues in the last few weeks and it has only served to reinforce what I already knew – that it's an extremely tricky business deciding who you are, what you are and how to present this to the market. The whole idea of the company image, the products it will offer, what strategy to adopt and everything else has been discussed ad nauseam to make sure that it is congruent with The Brand. My mantra is always *measure twice cut once* and I cannot stress this enough about the importance of getting things right from the start – that way you save lots of wasted material and effort – and especially so when deciding how you will present yourself to the market. So when our discussions felt like we were going round in circles or worse, shooting off in different directions I kept faith that at least we were moving.

I think some of my colleagues may think that my preoccupation with choosing the right name and brand, and being sure that what we do today is perfectly aligned with the path we are taking and where we intend to be in the future, is time not well spent. Maybe they think that it's simply an excuse to flex my creative muscles and allow me to 'play' in an area I love – creative design. Perhaps they feel that the preoccupation with brand name and design is just a waste of money and energy and we should rather be forging ahead and getting to the matter at hand – making money.

But come on – surely they go hand in hand? If the world's major corporations invest billions of dollars in corporate placement and brand identity, there must be an exceptionally strong business case for it. I understand that brand development and promotion can be costly in time and money and that this needs to be justified by a return on investment, but when it works, it's really worth the investment - Former CEO of Quaker once said "If this business were split up, I would give you the land and bricks and mortar, and I would take the brands and trademarks, and I would fare better than you". Companies are today more aware than ever before of the value that is directly attributable to their brand and its public perception.

The very purpose of branding seems to raise confusion among many people, but it is really very simple; a brand must perform commercially to fulfill the aims and aspirations of its owner. So forget about it being a pretext for vanity or indulgence – the finished product will have to pull its weight in a competitive market, and perform according to the demands of shareholders, employees and customers. The brand occupies a position of paramount importance in business. It's the first point of contact between a business and a customer. So its emotive, visual appeal is key to reaching out and establishing expectations in the mind of the consumer. As the saying goes – the first bite is with the eyes. Long before a person tastes a burger, smells a perfume, test drives a vehicle or tries on a pair of jeans, he experiences the brand through its visual manifestations.

So I am feeling hugely justified in thinking about the brand promise and what it will say, how it will look, taste and feel. But the more I am concentrating on it the more I am realising the pitfalls we have with developing a compelling brand.

As we grow up we are taught to conform, stand in line and obey the rules if you want to fit in (interpret go unnoticed). But a brand has a totally different agenda. A brand must stand out, attract attention and proclaim its presence! It also needs to be real – it needs to represent philosophy, mission, vision and attributes, and adhere to the truth in order for it to be taken seriously. When Air Botswana proclaims 'Going Your Way' my reaction is, "Er, how many routes does it have?" So the brand must not only be believable but also sincere, and must be able to rely on its integrity. No matter how much ketchup you put on a hot dog, if the vienna is second grade, all you will taste is the tomato sauce. The consumer will regret the purchase and choose the competition next time.

But it's more than that that I'm having to think about. The brand has to be appropriate for the time and the market. Picture a rich cream cake and a rice cracker. Each is right for somebody; each raises expectations and answers them. So it is with brands. The first time you interact with the brand you 'take a bite' and determine if it lives up to expectation. And timing is essential – sometimes we are ready for brands – other times not. A brand name like Virgin would never have flown (excuse the pun) 40 years ago, a company called Orange would have just been seen as a lemon, and who would have ever sanctioned a half-eaten polychrome apple to identify a computer company?

You can't create a brand by committee. When setting about to design a racehorse, it takes just a few minor compromises to end up with a camel and what company wants to be last past the post with a permanent hump? You want distinctness, memorability, challenge and engagement for all the right reasons, as well as a brand that elicits loyalty, love and respect – so everyone wants to buy into it! It may be the product that people pick off the shelf but ultimately it's the brand that keeps it a best seller.

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