



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

Brand spanking new

By Stuart White
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I was in a coffee shop the other day when I overheard shrieks of laughter. The butt of the joke was the headline in one of the local newspaper's business section proclaiming "Air Botswana wants to fly direct to London". Around the café, lunchtime customers collectively keeled over. Cynical, worldly-wise regional commuter passengers, from men to women their comments ranged from the incredulous to the downright unprintable, "They can't even get their flights to Johannesburg", "With what?!" and "Like yeah, that will fly" were some of the more polite remarks. Personally, along with others, I was hoping maybe Cape Town would be an attractive and more attainable starting point if they wanted to fly a bit further than their current Johannesburg and Harare hops, and even that's pushing it at present.

Thinking about it later I just couldn't get my mind around the idea that Air Botswana thought it would be able to offer flights to London. So tarnished is their brand that the headline just became unbelievable. When customers do not believe and trust in the brand anymore, this is the sort of reaction you get and when they lose faith in a brand – they simply don't buy or consume it. And where did our national airline go wrong? Well it has failed repeatedly from a leadership perspective – CEOs have been rotating as though through a revolving door for the last few years. It has failed in customer service – too many times - not to mention its failed profitability.

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Organisations know the importance of branding. We have entire departments dedicated to it and people specifically employed to manage The Brand. But to ensure we really understand what a brand is, first understand what it isn't. It is not a logo, nor is it a slogan, nor a clever by-line and neither is it a product. The brand is far less tangible. A brand is about creating subliminal feelings and responses whenever it is referenced. And depending on what the brand is, those feelings can be either positive or negative. Take the Swastika as an example. It is the oldest cross and emblem in the world. It forms a combination of four "L's" standing for Luck, Light, Love and Life. It has been found in ancient Rome and Greece, on Buddhist idols and on Chinese coins dated 315 B.C. Then Hitler got hold of it and all that has been forgotten. The universally high regard in which the Swastika was held as a good luck token has been utterly and emphatically corrupted, and its original meaning and symbolism destroyed. It is no longer associated with ancient religions and goodness and hope but instead invokes an emotive response forever associated with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The Swastika brand is not the insignia but what it represents, and thanks to Adolf, has now been corrupted forever and all time.

With that very clear example of how branding can so define a thing as to completely obscure one image and utterly replace it with another we can see that branding is deeply anchored in psycho-sociology. It takes into account both tangible and intangible attributes, the functional and emotional benefits, which comprise the beliefs and qualities that we recall when we think about the brand in its context. The value of a brand resides in the desired reception of those promises that the product or service will deliver.

As with the chillingly successful re-branding of the Swastika by the Third Reich, clearly, this can be an unpleasant revocation. The value then becomes the avoidance of an unpleasant experience – a conscious rejection of that brand and all it represents. Think Titanic and what that must have done to the shipbuilder's reputation or the Tiger Woods call-girl scandal. And once a reputation is tainted and tarnished to that extent it will require re-branding on the scale of British beef after the mad cow scare of the nineties to try and restore some semblance of acceptability.

Organisations know that unless their brand stands out, unless it has a unique selling position and a positive image, no-one will buy into it. And it is the same with people. We are all CEOs of our own companies - Me Inc. And to be competitive in business you have to ensure that you are successfully marketing your own unique brand. Ask yourself this question – What is it about my product or service that makes it completely different? If the answer is "I don't know" then it's time you did. Time to develop YOUR brand!

How do you do it? Well it's important to know precisely who and what you are. Branding is all about visibility – grabbing attention and holding it. This is what the big companies do well. A new industry buzz phrase is 'marks' – brands so familiar and so much a part of the fabric of our lives that our loyalty and love for them is deeply ingrained and almost unquestionable. Think Coke, McDonalds, Toyota, Colgate. Can you imagine a world without them? Of course not – that's how well-loved they are and how successful their global branding has been. So how do you set about selling yourself just as successfully and without their big marketing budgets?

A brand, personal or otherwise, is not necessarily about delivery but about a promise of delivery. It's about hype and hope, so it requires you to walk the walk and talk the talk. Say what you mean, mean what you say, and make it believable! It is about selling and marketing yourself so that you are more valuable than the next person. Finding out what is sexy and smart and flaunting it. Turning yourself into an irresistible brand with the knowledge that if you really and truly buy into yourself, why shouldn't everyone else?

Agree or disagree with this? Don'ts twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana

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