The Brand Equation
Denise Lee Yohn

February 14, 2012  Attempts to define a brand make me think of the elephant para-
different blind men describe an elephant based on what different body parts feel like.
Case in point: A collection of interviews, called Brand Thinking and Other Noble Pu-
Debbie Millman, that includes the world’s leading brand thinkers offering their expla-
what a brand is. Here’s a quick summary of what some of them said.

- “Something you have an unexplained, emotional connection to”
- “A promise of a certain kind of consistency and continuity over time”
- “A product with a compelling story”
- “A profound manifestation of the human condition”

With definitions like these, it’s no wonder successful brand-building remains as elusive as graceful
riding.
But my work on some of the world’s greatest brands and my study of many others has taught me
brand isn’t a thing; it’s an equation:
Brand = Culture + Customer Experience + Communication
Moreover, I’ve learned the way to create a brand isn’t through “branding.” Typical branding ac-
treating an image to serve as the face of a company, refreshing a logo or tagline in an attempt to
the business and developing advertising campaigns to get your name out there are pointless. Instead
brands are built through an extraordinary culture, remarkable customer experiences and
compelling communication.
Culture. A brand starts with an extraordinary company culture, because you can’t deliver greatness
customers if you’re not developing greatness among your employees. A vital culture cultivates the
norms that guide the way a company operates.
Delivering “WOW” through service and creating “a little weirdness” are the renowned cornerstones
at Zappos. That company credits its culture for creating a unique service experience for customer
fueling its growth from $0 to $1 billion in less than 10 years. Jack In The Box, the 2,200-unit fast
creates competitive advantage through its fun culture. Because its employees and franchisees are
make others laugh and celebrate good times,” the company benefits from greater engagement in
development, product launches and new strategic initiatives.
Culture is what sustains growth over time. Products and services may come and go, but a strong
ensures the consistency in brand experience that customers come to trust and value.
Customer Experience. Remarkable customer experiences are the second element of the brand eq-
All companies strive to deliver products or services that are valued by its customers, but the ones
strongest brands differentiate and delight throughout the entire customer experience. In fact, even
operations is designed with the brand in mind.
Singapore Airlines embraces innovation, technology, genuine quality and customer service as its brand values and attributes. So the company pioneered many in-flight experiential and entertain-
innovations, including being the first to introduce hot meals, personal entertainment systems and
demand. “Singapore Girls,” the airline’s flight attendants, are world-renowned for offering extrac-
customer service with distinctive Asian hospitality. It also runs one of the most comprehensive
training programs in the industry for its crew to make sure the brand experience is fully and consistently delivered.
Communication. When a company has a great culture and customer experience, compelling communication complete the
building effort.
Communicating with your target customers educates them and allows them to know, understand and appreciate the uniq
your company creates. Communication engages the target in dialogues that enhance and extend their relationship with your company.

Ralph Lauren fuses art, fashion and technology in its dramatic brand communications. Just as its stores are designed to create context and develop desire for its products, the company uses communication to tell stories and convey the brand’s unique identity. Whether it’s a website that allows customers to make their own virtual rugby shirts and beam them to store windows, or a multimedia (merchandising and entertainment) show with London’s tony Bond Street as the backdrop, the company uses “merchantainment” to create brand-building communications.

A brand really is an equation. The way a company inspires and engages its employees should be inextricably linked to how it engages its customers. Together, culture and customer experience produce an exceptional employee base that produces exceptional results.

And only when a company has a great culture and customer experience can communication truly build the brand. If customer experience and communication don’t add up, communication becomes nothing more than old-fashioned branding that can’t be built right through.

The brand equation makes it clear that a brand is internal and external; it’s what you do and what you say. And strong customer experience and communication add up to a strong brand and a strong business.

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