

Operationalizing Brands with New Technologies

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New technologies—like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, social networking, augmented reality, tagging, wikis, social indexing—and the applications they make possible have affected our culture in a profound way. Still, I hope they will have an even greater impact going forward.

Truth is, the use of these new technologies has been quite limited when it comes to the way companies build their brands. To date, most technology-enabled, brand-building approaches have focused on brand expression and communication.

The widely praised use of social media by Starbucks provides an excellent example. The promotions the company has run on its Facebook page and the engagement ads on Facebook's home page have helped Starbucks build a larger brand fan base. Other social-media initiatives, such as asking people to take photos of new outdoor advertising and post them on Twitter, and using a YouTube video to promote its Election Day free-coffee offer, are ways in which Starbucks has employed new digital tools to express its brand values and attributes and to communicate with consumers.

But expressing and communicating are not the same

as operationalizing. While expressing a brand is to dimensionalize it through creativity, to operationalize a brand is to use it to drive the business and to develop an organizational system for delivering brand value.

After all, a brand isn't simply a logo, image, or message. A brand is a bundle of values and attributes that defines:

- a product or service's value that is delivered to its customers, and
- the way of doing business that is the basis of a company's relationships with stakeholders.

Simply put, a brand is what a company does and how it does it. And brand building involves improving what the company delivers to its customers and how it runs its business—essentially its experience design for customers and stakeholders.

Delivering Value to Customers

New technologies can play as much of a role in operationalizing a brand as they do in expressing it. Operationalizing involves identifying, prioritizing, and implementing programs and initiatives to deliver the brand through the core organizational operating system, fulfilling the first part of the brand definition.

eBags and Nike are good examples of companies that

use new media applications and tactics to operationalize their brands and design the customer experience to deliver increased value to customers.

eBags is a leading online retailer of luggage, handbags, business cases, and backpacks with a brand platform based on the idea that eBags is your "perfect bag" expert. Instead of initiating a new media campaign declaring themselves as "your perfect bag expert," it has focused on developing ways to be that expert.

eBags provides more than 1.9 million customer reviews and testimonials so that buyers can make informed purchases. Providing such detail makes it easy for customers to determine whether or not a bag is the right one for them. Indeed, negative and critical comments are included, proving eBags' understanding that being an "expert" means being honest and unbiased.

However, the company takes commenting one step further by tagging reviews with customer-supplied information about how frequently the bag is used, what it's used for, and the occupation and gender of the customer. eBags promises that customers will soon be able to search and sort products by these tags.

There is also an eBags blog that provides shopping tips and

[1] Hemp, P. and T. A. Stewart. "Leading Change When Business Is Good: The HBR Interview—Samuel J. Palmisano." *Harvard Business Review* December 2004.

recommendations, and videos that explain the design and features of bags. The site features a “Laptop Bag Finder” that uses filtering technology so customers can enter their laptop model and/or its dimensions; the search function lists only those bags that will fit their laptop. Almost all of this information can be shared, Digg’d, or commented on. eBags unleashes the power of social media to deliver their “perfect bag” expertise to a broad audience.

eBags has demonstrated it understands the difference between using new technical capabilities for simple brand expression and for more valuable brand delivery. Of course the company has a Twitter account and a Facebook page. But it shows that Web 2.0 is not just a way to facilitate communication about its brand—it’s a way to actually deliver the brand.

Nike also uses new technologies to deliver increased value to customers. The Nike brand is about providing innovation and inspiration to every athlete, amateur and professional. Nike+ integrates an in-shoe sensor device with nikeplus.com allowing runners to track their progress, compare their performance with that of others, and participate in forums. Nike+ makes it possible for runners to set up virtual challenges with other participants and to personalize their homepage to illustrate their mood, route, and the weather. From hardware design to software capabilities, and from user interface to social networking integration, the entire Nike+ operating platform brings the value of Nike’s



Image created by Monica Seibel

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brand to life in a valuable customer experience.

Brand As a Way of Doing Business

Conventional wisdom suggests that internal brand efforts should focus on line employees, e.g., staffers working the counter at McDonald's or those who play the characters at Disney World. But, in fact, all stakeholders affect and are affected by the brand.

The second half of the definition of a brand speaks more to its internal value: It's the bundle of values and attributes that define the way a company does business with its stakeholders. The brand should drive the organization, aligning and guiding every single business decision and task. It should also

serve as a compass, defining what the company does and does not do.

Stakeholder integration with the brand must happen on two dimensions:

- **Horizontal alignment**—across the organization, all internal stakeholders share a common understanding of the brand.
- **Vertical engagement**—each individual person is fully engaged from their:
 - heads—they're knowledgeable about what the brand stands for and how it is positioned, to
 - hearts—they're inspired by the brand and motivated to change what they do and how they do it in order to operationalize the brand, to
 - hands and feet—they're equipped with and empowered by tools to interpret and reinforce the brand appropriately.

New technologies play a role in brand operationalization by facilitating both dimensions. Some examples:

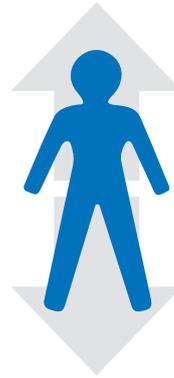
IBM. Using unique online collaboration tools and moderation techniques, IBM undertook a three-day, enterprisewide effort it called "ValuesJam." It was ini-

"Vertical" Alignment of

Heads

Hearts

Hands & Feet

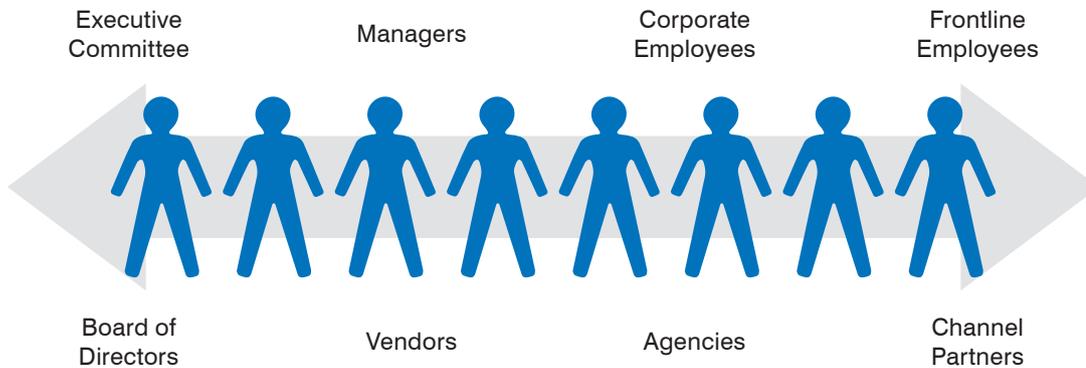


tiated by CEO Sam Palmisano, who believed that revisiting the company's founding principles would be critical to future growth and success and needed a way to unify, manage, and integrate IBM's 300,000 employees, who were spread across 17 countries.

ValuesJam involved an online forum in which senior executives moderated employee discussions about the proposed new values. Employees' input was monitored in real time, and thanks to IBM's text-mining software, moderators were able to flash the hottest themes in order to focus the discussion.

The values that arose out of this undertaking now guide everything IBM does. Palmisano explains, "When your business is primarily based on knowledge...people—rather than products—become your brand. Just as our products have had to be consistent with the IBM brand promise, now more than ever, so do our people. One way to ensure that is to inform their behavior with a globally consistent set of values" [1]. This is an example of how new collaboration technology was used at

“Horizontal” Alignment of



IBM to drive brand integration and alignment.

Sony. As Sony faced technological change and continued expansion, its leaders knew they could not assume all stakeholders shared one common understanding of the brand and how to evolve it to maintain the company's leadership position. So they decided to use the Sony brand to focus and align the company—the brand was central to the organization, and it was used to drive and guide everything Sony did.

The company developed a Brand Engagement Toolbox to drive brand execution. This collection of tools was used to inform, inspire, and instruct internal stakeholders—for example, decision trees guide people through key decisions so that the outcomes support the brand and interactive experiences that help employees internalize the brand values and attributes. The Internet-based Toolbox contained images, content, video clips, and quotes, and featured a blog-like forum for sharing and learning about the brand from other employees.

Sony's initiative was undertaken before Facebook and Twitter were developed, but it's easy to imagine how a Brand Engagement Toolbox might employ these tools and their applications today. Polling and quiz features might be used to gauge people's understanding of the brand or to nominate brand case studies. Real-time messaging might enable employees from different areas of the company to ask questions and contribute ideas to brand-building efforts. And consumer input and feedback might be seamlessly integrated into brand-based decision making.

New Technology, New Brand Building

New technologies can be used to operationalize brands: One is by developing and deploying operating systems in which brand value is delivered through social media technology, as in the case of eBags, or through interactivity, community tools, and customization, as in the Nike example. The other is by using the brand to align and integrate stakeholders through collaboration pro-

grams (IBM) or virtual Brand Engagement Toolboxes (Sony).

Both ways leverage the capabilities of networks and new media to optimize business strategies and experience design. As such, new technologies extend beyond their current brand expression and communication applications and affect the business at an entirely different level.

As business leaders return their attention to growth, they need more than marketing solutions and innovative tactics. By operationalizing their brands, companies use their brands not just to gain a competitive edge, but to change the game completely.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for more than 20 years. World-class brands including Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King, and Nautica have called on Yohn, an established speaker, author, and consulting partner. Read more by Yohn at <http://www.deniseleeyohn.com/resources.html>.