

The Brand Equation

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0 Comment



February 14, 2012 Attempts to define a brand make me think of the elephant parable where 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 Pursuits](#) by Debbie Millman, that includes the world's leading brand thinkers offering their explanations of 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”

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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 activities like creating an image to serve as the face of a company, refreshing a logo or tagline in an attempt to improve 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 to your 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 customers, fueling its growth from \$0 to \$1 billion in less than 10 years. Jack In the Box, the 2,200-unit fast-food chain, creates competitive advantage through its fun culture. Because its employees and franchisees are encouraged to “make others laugh and celebrate good times,” the company benefits from greater engagement in the marketplace, product launches and new strategic initiatives.

Culture is what sustains growth over time. Products and services may come and go, but a strong culture 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 equation. All companies strive to deliver products or services that are valued by its customers, but the strongest brands differentiate and delight throughout the entire customer experience. In fact, even the customer service operations is designed with the brand in mind.

[Singapore Airlines](#) embraces innovation, technology, genuine quality and customer service as its primary brand values and attributes. So the company pioneered many in-flight experiential and entertainment innovations, including being the first to introduce hot meals, personal entertainment systems and live entertainment on demand. “Singapore Girls,” the airline's flight attendants, are world-renowned for offering exceptional customer service with distinctive Asian hospitality. It also runs one of the most comprehensive and rigorous 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 completes the brand-building effort.

Communicating with your target customers educates them and allows them to know, understand and appreciate the unique

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 store (where sight, sound, space and smell) show with London's tony Bond Street as the backdrop, the company uses "merchainment" (merchandising and entertainment) 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 attracts and 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 comes 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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