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The Role Of Brand Must Be Better Articulated

by Mark Di Somma

I had a long talk to speaker and "**Great Brands**" author Denise Lee Yohn recently. There were **many interesting points** in our conversation, but one observation in particular stood out: marketers are failing to successfully articulate the role of brand to others in the organization.

This is Denise's thought: "Brand is the least likely suspect when things are going well and the most likely suspect when things are going badly."

When organizations are powering ahead, they often pay their brands little attention. In this context, the brand can be seen by some as little more than the label that the organization uses to identify the specific goods that come from them. Denise gave a great example of this. When Sony was at its height, the brand got little attention by way of investment or interest from many in the organization. My take-away was that the company saw itself as a successful business rather than as a successful brand – or, put another way, it failed to recognize, or at least capitalize on, its brand as an underpinning factor in its success.

When things go badly, on the other hand, decision makers are quick to point out that the brand is not competitive enough and that the organization should have spent, or should be spending more now, to turn things around. Suddenly, they feel an urgent need to **communicate their "brand"**, **tell their "story"** and **change their "culture"**. Except that, of course, by this point the opportunity for a quick turn-around has long passed. Brand has become the name for a pressing need to find a panacea.

The Role Of Brand Defined

So what role should brand play in a company's success and how should marketers be positioning brand as a corporate contributor? The temptation for many, especially in good times, is to see and dismiss brand as little more than a costly nice-to-have; one that requires continuous investment for nebulous gain. "Sometimes it works. Other times it doesn't." I hear this a lot from executives that confuse brand and marketing or even brand and branding. (Brand is what you have by way of a value adding mechanism – the sum load of consumer impressions. Marketing or branding are the means to activate or retain that value in a market.)

But you can't just market – in the sense of rinse and repeat to a budget. Because then you are simply looking to raise awareness or generate attention. Nor is brand a stationery balance sheet item that contributes to overall worth on a yearly basis as some brand valuation models might suggest. It is an asset, but it doesn't behave like one in the traditional sense. Rather, I prefer to think of brand as a volatile, market-sensitive multiplier that ebbs and flows in terms of the contribution it makes to market presence, consumer interest and price elevation; one that should be monitored and adjusted regularly on that basis.

The volatility of a brand revolves around its impact. What difference is it making for consumers in terms of inclination? If the brand is strong, then even an ordinary product can become potentially more compelling. But brand interest also waxes and wanes. A brand can be strong at one point and weaker at another. The key for marketers is having the metrics in place to spot when their brand is cranking and when it is dying. The market-sensitive aspect is a reminder that no brand is in a market in isolation. It is impacted not just by economic factors, such as consumer confidence, but also the activities and brands of competitors. Finally, the multiplier effect expresses itself in terms of what the brand achieves beyond the market norm. To me, this is all about margin – the price that the brand can command because it is the brand it is.

Brand is not a static presence – and therefore it cannot be treated as one. If you are looking to grow the business, for example, what specific sorts of growth are you looking for (volume, price, per-customer value, market footprint), why and over what timeframe? Knowing what you are looking to grow will determine whether you think of your brand as the means to create distinction, attract greater margin, increase engagement or position the company in a wider context. In other words, your brand needs to be assigned, and measured against, clear strategic goals.

Equally, if you are looking to **defend your market-leading position**, what are your strengths as a business and how can you express those through the brand to give consumers clear reasons to stay with you? If you are a business that is faster-to-market than your competitors, for example, your brand should focus on your responsiveness and consumer sensitivity. If you wish to compete on quality, then your brand should probably accentuate craftsmanship, attention to detail, secret ingredients (if you have any) and desirability?

The Meaning Of Brand

Too often, organizations treat brand as almost a compliance component. And in treating their brand as a must-have, they invent stories for the brand that they think consumers want to hear rather than developing and consolidating brands that intensify their strategic strengths. Or they simply place their logo at the base of an also-ran list of features and wait for the phone to ring.

Your brand is about more than who you are. Your brand is why you are, what makes you competitive, how valuable you feel to a consumer and where you intend to triumph. It adds to how you participate in a market. It helps consumers recognize the value that you are bringing and will deliver them into the future. If you are not expressing these strategic necessities through your brand, you don't have one. You have an identifier – a placeholder that goes at the end of your TV commercial or forms the URL for your Facebook page. You have a memory jogger.