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Making a Mark

By Andrew Engblom

Building a brand is like building a reputation. Whether through a company's advertising, sales personnel or products, branding is about creating a consistent, reliable and positive experience for consumers. And whenever a company interacts with the public, it is building its brand — for good or for bad.

The concept of branding isn't new, but during these tough economic times it's seeing a renewal of interest especially in the struggling technology industry.

"Branding isn't about doing a cool ad," says Mark Morris, co-founder of The Brand Consultancy in Washington, D.C. "It's about delivering a quality product and knowing consumers."

Companies have realized that simply creating hype and buzz about a product doesn't cut it because even the best hype fails when customers aren't loyal or happy.

"Branding is a promise you make," says Morris. "Technology has had a problem with meeting that promise."

Advertising may get a consumer's attention, but if a company can't back it up, it's just wasting money. A poorly designed Web site, for example, or slow delivery, high prices or impersonal service at a call center can just as easily send customers elsewhere.

"I don't want to beat people up, but many of the companies that emerged around the hope of e-commerce simply weren't doing the basics well," Morris says. "They wanted to be the [Amazon.com founder] Jeff Bezos of footwear, but they had never been in the shoe business before."

Now that the dot-com boom's gone bust, branding experts are trying to reinforce a broader understanding of the concept, and many companies are seeing the need to listen. Moreover, after so many very public failures, there is a perception that many of today's technology companies may not be here tomorrow.

"So many brands have gone out of business that the market may have a credibility problem," explains Mike Tringale, director of marketing and strategic planning at Kircher Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based provider of branding and advertising services. "The technology industry is often its own worst enemy."



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Tringale urges companies to make an effort to include reliability and responsibility in their branding. Being the “coolest” company isn’t enough.

“Branding needs to subliminally say ‘this company is consistent and reliable,’” he says. “Tell them what you’re going to give them. Give it to them. And in the end, let them know that your product delivered and it will again.”

It’s about creating loyalty to the brand. With so much competition in the marketplace, it’s easy for customers to switch. A good brand will bring in new customers and keep current ones.

Gary Almes, president of Words in Progress, a Rockville, Md., Web development company, says creating the sense of stability and professionalism is especially important when trying to win big clients.

Words in Progress is planning to change its name because it no longer fits its current business, he adds. Almes feels the name of an 8-year-old company with some big customers has to have “some weight.”

“We didn’t want to sound like another start-up company and have a name that was way too cute,” he explains. “People won’t spend \$100,000 on a company called ‘Flying Turtle.’”

Almes says he spent more than a year finding a new name that he’s comfortable with, although he won’t release it yet. “It was a long an arduous process,” he admits.

SB Master President Master McNeil says putting effort into the corporate name is important — especially for small to mid-size companies. Her Berkeley, Calif.-based company specializes in branding and creating names.

“The name of the company is the single most important element of the brand,” she says, because it’s the most prevalent part of the brand. “It’s the core that the brand flows around.” She advises clients to avoid using initials and highly descriptive names. Both are common problems for technology companies.

“The company name is what is seen and heard most consistently,” says McNeil. “Engineering-driven companies like precise and descriptive names,” she says. “[But] a few years later, their names are outdated.”

For example, Silicon Graphics now goes by SGI. “Silicon” simply wasn’t a cutting edge technology anymore, she notes. Even America Online has run into branding problems. McNeil says the word “America” turned out to be a burden for the company. “Five or six years ago, they realized that “America” doesn’t play well in Europe. Now they’re AOL.”



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Domestically, however, since Sept. 11, words like "America" and "U.S." probably are regaining favor, particularly for tech companies engaged in security and related fields.

Lower case e and i, and com, have seen a similar fate. Many companies are dropping them, fewer still are adopting them. The problem was companies were building their brands around a particular technology and a particular delivery method. It was limiting.

"It was a short lived and unfortunate moment," McNeil says. "It's over now."

One easy strategy for smaller companies is to simply retain the founder's name. "It implies responsibility and longevity," she explains. "Those are highly valued right now."

Elizabeth Shea, principal of the public relations firm the SheaHedges Group, of McLean Va., says whatever the company and whatever its name, it's important to stick with the branding in tough economic times.

"The word on the street is that the first thing to go with a company is advertising and branding," she says. "[But] if a company drops its brand, people may start to wonder about its credibility. Companies don't have to spend a lot of money, they just have to keep their brand intact."

Stronger companies, though, can use these times as an opportunity to get ahead of the competition.

"Create a brand as a leader," she suggests. "The best brand will usually rise to the top."

People want to buy the best brand, and they will look to that company first. "The brand is often what gets you to the table," Shea says. "The company with the best brand sets the bar higher for the competition to reach."

Whether companies are prepared or not, creating a brand cannot be overlooked or shunted aside when times are tough. As The Brand Consultancy's Morris puts it: "Brand happens. It's like your reputation — you can either manage it or not."

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