

In a Sea of Sameness Brands Must Stand Out.

By Karen Post

Just like a cattle brand, a commercial brand denotes a difference. Management guru Tom Peters says, “Be distinct or be extinct.” Marketing veteran Jack Trout proclaims, “Differentiate or die” to survive in our era of killer competition. I say, “Run like the rest and you too will be road kill.”

The essence of a brand is the mental imprint we plant on the minds of our market. Like a Brain Tattoo™ a brand creates feelings, emotions and an affinity to our products, services and companies. For years, large companies have devoted tremendous resources to the branding process. They know well-developed and executed brands create customer loyalty, block out competition, allow for greater profit margins and instill confidence in stakeholders. They also know that, for buyers, brands simplify choice, reduce risk and purchasing anxiety, enhance self-image and save time. This same branding formula can work for a small business or a nonprofit as well as develop a personal identity.

A strong brand is the bond to the buyer. It must be relevant, distinct and memorable. In a society of so many choices, being different can be the determining factor in the decision-making process. Today in all industries there are many similar business models, products and services—all paddling for survival in a sea of sameness. Cover the logo on an ad and you often have no idea what company placed it. The same thing happens with company names, brochures and specialty items: Many look like twin sisters with the same focus on features, no benefits and promises, cookie-cutter language and nothing that sets apart the brand. Yet many wonder, “Why is our brand so weak?”

As business leaders and entrepreneurs, we must have the courage to be different, leave our comfort zones and stay committed to our brand difference over the long haul. Brands are not built in a day; many take years. However, the cumulative affect can produce astounding value outweighing the time and money invested.

So how does a company, product or service stand out and land a brand?

You must first completely understand the true meaning of the words distinctive and unique. I travel around the country and speak to high-level business leaders about their brand difference. Many contend that it's their “service and product” that set them apart. Ironically many times their competitors sing the same song, and both are lost in the deep sea of sameness, getting nowhere.

In most cases, service and product alone are not strong points of difference in a brand. And even if they were, most buyers are so jaded by this proposition it's a very hard sell. Brand positioning

with the lowest price is also a dangerous avenue to take. Today's buyers hear this claim too often and are very skeptical.

Depending on your circumstances, one or a combination of the following can be the starting point to distinguishing your brand. Once you decide on your unique, strategic direction, the tactical execution must be redundant and consistent or the brand is doomed to fail. Brand uniqueness positions need to be authentic, an extension of your core values and something that can be delivered with integrity.

Here is a partial list of differentiating possibilities for your brand. There are many more.

- Your credentials
- Your physical characteristics
- Your mental attitude
- Your heritage
- Your expert team
- Your special ingredients
- Your speed of action
- Your technology
- Your lack of something
- Your pioneer status
- Your geographical location
- Your niche markets
- Your social consciousness

Think about some of the most memorable brands of our time. What distinct mental image comes to mind? Volvo: safety. UPS: the brown guys. Southwest Airlines: no frills and casual. The more unique the brand position, the more protection you have from competition and the tighter your connection will be to your customers. This applies to any size and type of business.

Successful branding sometimes takes a radical shift in thinking by the organization's leadership. Branding is not merely the logo, some catchy tagline or the creative pastime for the marketing department. Branding is the heart and soul of an organization. Your brand should stand for something, be authentic and uniquely yours. It should be woven into every important decision and resonate through every point of contact with a company's market. Having a strong point of difference in your brand category is a major advantage in landing a successful brand.

About the author.

Karen Post, The Branding Diva™, is an author, national speaker and consultant on branding, marketing and communication issues. For nearly 20 years she has provided branding counsel and communication programs for individuals; start-ups; local, regional and national companies; politicians; and nonprofit organizations. For more information contact Karen Post at kp@brandingdiva.com or visit her Website at www.brandingdiva.com.
