The 7 deadly sins of brand management - and how to avoid them

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Some of the most valuable assets a firm has are the brands it has developed. Brands create identification, differentiation and value for customers and shareholders alike. By influencing customer choice, creating a loyal and passionate following as well as commanding a premium for their products and services, strong brands can be key to great business performance.

That is, unless branding mistakes prevent firms from creating powerful brands. The more you steer away from the seven deadly sins of brand management, the better chance you have of creating a lasting brand.

1. The Vampire Effect – funny and beautiful instead of unique and relevant



The Vampire Effect refers to "surprising" or "gimmicky" content that sucks attention away from the original product or idea.

We see this when the message is not consistent with what the brand stands for. Effective advertising is not only surprising, it is extremely consistent with the brand message and shows continuity of positioning. Customer insights come first.

The brand message should be based on the buying-decisive need, be as relevant and unique as possible and involve emotional pictorial brand content.

2. For everything and everybody – trying to be everybody's darling

You cannot please everyone. Nor should you seek to. Markets need to be segmented because not all customers are alike.Subsets of customers with common needs or characteristics should be identified and targeted distinctively – e.g. the "new generation" (Pepsi) or the "no company car drivers" (Porsche). Sometimes you need to have the courage to say no.



3. Empty promises – overpromise & underdeliver



An empty promise, i.e. a perceived discrepancy between what is claimed and the behavior that is observed, leaves customers disappointed and can damage a brand significantly.

Brand image is only partly created by what you say – more importantly, it is created by what customers actually experience.

Greenwashing, for instance, is a situation where more time and money is spent on advertising and marketing than on the efforts by a company to become more competent at delivering their promises. Aim high, but don't make promises on things you can be measured on – and that you cannot keep.

4. New is better – abrupt changes in brand management



The example of cigarette brands Marlboro on the one hand, and Camel on the other has shown that consistent advertising leads to a stable market share. Short term thinking and too many changes of direction destroy long term brand value.

The two seemingly opposing goals of continuity and actuality have to be reconciled by maintaining brand values while simultaneously adapting to new developments– all while not constantly changing directions.

(From a professional marketing perspective, it's a pity that Marlboro discontinued its famous "freedom & adventure" cowboy campaign – and replaced it with a difficult to understand "Don't be a maybe" message.)

5. Consumer confusion – inside view instead of outside view



Companies running a multi-brand strategy face the risk of confusing consumers and failing to create recognizability.

A bad example are many touristic destinations: If each and every single small region tries to be a brand of its own, the larger country will never be a power brand.

Each brand has to have its own purpose and must not be perceived as contradictory to the corporate brand. Rule of thumb in branding: Less is often more.

6. Pseudo positioning – illusion marketing and illusory worlds



Many companies position their products in a way that ultimately differs little from the competition.

The brand images of the largest insurance companies for instance are interchangeable from the point of view of the consumer, even though the responsible marketing managers might well be able to explain subtle differences in positioning. This is particularly the case with low-involvement products & services.

Here, a seamless customer journey or experience is more important to the brand, i.e. leading customers to the sale and understanding what discourages them while investigating a sale, as well as supporting the whole buying cycle of the customer, including the after-sales and usage phases.

7. Unilateral (or one-sided) 'missionizing' - brand management dominated by advertising



Nowadays, traditional mass advertising no longer cuts it. Instead of basic sender-receiver communication, integrating the customer actively into the communication process is key.

Social media should be used to let your customers speak to you and their suggestions should be taken very seriously.

Nikon's "I am" campaign was particularly successful because there was a change in perspective: the focus was no longer on the product and its functions - but rather on the customer and what they can do with the camera.

Building a brand involves ensuring its integrity and investing into it. Good branding needs time to develop, so continuity is key. Attention to the changing needs of customers leads to making sure that the brand does not become boring and outdated. The ability to protect your brand while leveraging its core message consistently by avoiding the deadly sins will be rewarded with a strong brand identity.

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