

Is Your Brand In Your Plan?

If you “google” on the word “branding”, you’ll get 50,900,000 hits in .22 seconds. You’ll find articles from academic experts, marketing gurus, design divas, advertising whizzes, and thousands of companies ready and willing to help you create a powerful brand.

You’ll also find several definitions of the word “brand”, most of which sound something like this one, which most people would agree doesn’t even begin to describe what branding really is:

A distinguishing symbol, mark, logo, name, word, sentence or a combination of these items that companies use to distinguish their product from others in the market.

These days you’ll hear debate about whether marketers or consumers have more control over brands, theories about emotional brand attachment, stories of individuals creating their own personal brands, and (much) more.

We’re not here to add to the clutter about branding, and we do not profess to be branding experts. But as business and strategic planning experts, we believe it is important for business leaders to think about the following concepts regarding branding and strategic planning:

Our Definition - Your brand is really how your customers and the marketplace perceive you. If you’re doing a good job serving your market and in your branding efforts, then how you want to be perceived and how you are perceived are the same. You are delivering on your brand promise, and your “distinguishing symbol, mark, logo, name, word, sentence or a combination of these items” authentically reflects your promise.

Brand Equity is Real - While difficult to achieve and measure, there is no question that brand equity is a real thing and should be an important strategic goal for any business. When customers choose you over a competitor based on their perception of you without making a detailed price or other comparison with your competition; they are more likely to pay a higher price, renew, buy more and tell others about you. All of these actions contribute to the bottom line.

The Common Separation Between Branding and Strategic Planning is Not Productive - Historically, branding activities and strategic planning activities have been separate and disconnected. The Senior Leadership Team may be undertaking a strategic planning process at the same time that the marketing department is cooking up a new tagline or contracting with an outside agency to update the look and logo. This separation only leads to disconnects, discontent, and the erosion of brand equity.

Externally, if the company is not delivering on its brand promise; i.e. it is creating and delivering products and services that are not aligned with the way the company is trying to portray itself; the marketplace will know it immediately. It is as simple as not doing what you say, which is a fast way to lose credibility.

Internally, if employees at all levels don’t understand the brand in the same way; then there are disconnects between how the product is marketed, sold and serviced. Customers feel lied to, marketing blames sales, sales blames marketing, and the service people blame them both. None of this is productive.



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Brand Must be Integral to Strategic Planning – The bottom line is that it is not possible to create a sound strategic plan without having a good understanding of how the marketplace perceives you and how that perception relates to customers' needs and values. Ideally, in creating a strategic plan, you have a good understanding of what people need, that you can deliver, that they cannot get elsewhere. Then, your product/solution development process will create what your marketplace needs and your marketing/branding team will create the look, feel and messaging that authentically portrays your unique promise and value to the market. And, if you communicate your strategic plan and branding efforts throughout your organization, and it makes sense, your employees will reinforce the brand with each customer interaction. The product is marketed, sold and serviced according to the same promise and message.

Therefore – It is critical to understand brand perception in order to develop a sound strategic plan – which then should serve as the foundation of the branding efforts.

You see this connection in the teachings of our favorite business gurus, W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, authors of [Blue Ocean Strategy](#); as well as Jim Collins, author of [Built to Last](#) and [Good to Great](#), among others.

In [Blue Ocean Strategy](#) in which the authors explain how to create an uncontested market space and make your competition irrelevant, a critical step is to understand what your customers need and value by observing how they use and therefore perceive your products.

We also see the connection to Jim Collins' Hedgehog concept, which he defines as a simple, crystal clear concept that flows from a deep understanding about the intersection of 1) what your company is passionate about, 2) what you can be best in the world at, and 3) what drives your economic engine. In our view, if your branding and strategic planning efforts are aligned; your economic engine will be driven because you are offering what people want and therefore they'll buy it; if you're best in the world at what you do, then you're delivering the value that your customers are looking for; and if you are passionate about what you are doing, you will create an exciting brand that will create brand equity.



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