

4 MEDITATIONS ON BRAND

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People continually ask me how to energize their own brand-building, and I hear many of the same misunderstandings resurface. The four directives below may help to clarify what appear to be this season's most mysterious issues of branding.

Don't confuse the brand with the product.

Brand is -in essence- a promise made by a company or institution, which must be continually kept. Deliver less than you promise and the brand devalues. When a brand focuses on a product or service, credibility hinges on the commodity itself remaining stable and unchanging. This is hazardous in a market which demands constant responsiveness, innovation and transformation. A product or service offering will evolve over time. If brand has been built solely around the introduction of a 2003 microchip, for example, the brand promise may find itself obsolete a year later. It is important to create a single, simple brand statement, which expresses a governing value or purpose, which drives or inspires product/service. Some historically successful brand statements: Coca-Cola=recreation; Microsoft=reliability; McDonald's=family fun; Disney=wholesome values; Nike=performance.

Keep the stakeholders uppermost in mind.

When crafting brand, bear in mind the multiple constituencies addressed by it: employees, managers, vendors, customers, shareholders, industry analysts, media, secondary parties indirectly affected by company action (such as community, next-door neighbors, industry colleagues, competitors). Each group needs to understand the brand in its own language, on its own terms. Frequently, companies explain themselves in words that are meaningful internally, but which have little resonance outside your own sphere. Each constituency has its own issues and buzz words. The trick is to communicate your brand promise so that your values are correctly understood on all fronts.

Remember 2003's two hottest buttons: oversight and globalization.

Companies today are held under the most intense scrutiny imaginable. Recent scandals and rampant misbehavior, ecological irresponsibility, corporate malfeasance, profligate executive compensation mixed with the speed and transparency of information mean that companies must remain extra vigilant. Be aware that you are being watched by a million unseen eyes, and that the smallest breach may lead to unnecessary appropriation of surplus value for your brand.

Now consider the debate over globalization. Some believe it simply a euphemism for "American." But the term refers to a larger concept, which bears heavily on brand perception. Globalization is viewed as a disregard for local convention, an attempt to aggressively standardize and homogenize, a migration away from "humanizing" values.

It suggests a world of cold and calculated sameness, where the objectives of business dominate every agenda, damn all the rest.

Look over the horizon.

Brand moves slowly into the marketplace. The simple, single statement of values made today needs to repeat many times, from multiple directions before it takes hold. Your target customer may learn about you 2-5 years before you first meet them. It's important to know who today's customers are, and where they are going. It's more important to think beyond, in the direction of who tomorrow's customers are, where they are today, and how you can begin to reach them immediately.

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