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Keeping the Brand Healthy: The Annual Brand Checkup

by Mark Shipley

One of the keys and biggest challenges with building premium brands is maintaining a healthy balance between growing the business and maintaining consistency in your brand communications program. That's because premium brands, by their very nature, have a way of taking on a life of their own.

When you first position your brand, the people behind it become engaged. They take ownership and get down to business. The competition reacts. The category evolves. Over time, staffs come and go. New players aren't always adequately initiated. Experienced staff members are often too busy to take notice or simply forget why staying true to the brand is important.

That's why we recommend that once a year top management step back and take a look at how the brand is holding up. It's not that difficult to do, and it can be an illuminating and energizing experience. Depending on what you discover, it can help you sleep better at night or set your branding priorities for the coming year.

This annual review can take several forms. There's the full-blown brand audit, which in many cases is complete overkill. Unless there are obvious signs that your brand is underperforming, we recommend a quick checkup before committing to a more comprehensive brand audit.

The Annual Brand Checkup

A great way for top management to get a quick read on how well the brand is performing is a simple exercise we call the Annual Brand Check Up. It's easy to do, doesn't require much of a time commitment on the part of your staff, and it's relatively inexpensive.

Here's how it works:

Approximately 10 people are chosen at random for an informal conversation. Some are from your company—we recommend including one person from sales and one person from marketing (but not the directors). And others are customers, end users, and, if you can identify them, non-users of your brand but users in the category.

Each person is asked two questions. The first is, "In three words or less, what does (brand name) stand for?" If they have a problem answering the question or need a little prompting, we make a note of it.

If they are able to answer the first question, with or without prompting, we follow-up with the following question: "What things does (brand name) offer or do, day in and day out, that supports the brand promise?"

From their answers, a pattern should emerge.

Here's what to look for:

- Can everyone define what the brand stands for?
- Is there consistency in what everyone says the brand stands for?
- Is there consistency between what insiders and outsiders are saying?
- Are the words people use to describe what the brand stands for likely to inspire advocacy?
- Do the things that they say support your brand promise really support it?

If you find yourself answering "yes" to all of these questions, your brand communications program is likely doing its job. On the other hand, if you find yourself answering "no" to any of these, you may want to consider a more comprehensive diagnosis strategy, like a brand audit.

The Brand Audit

If you Google the words "brand audit," you'll find that just about everybody defines it differently. Some suggest a brand audit to be simply a visual audit of marketing materials. Others claim that a review of verbal expressions of the brand should be included. Some require complex quantitative studies, while others rely on qualitative research methodologies.

Regardless of methodology, we recommend that a brand audit include a close examination of some, or all, of the following:

- The brand perceptions of external partners and customers
- The brand perceptions of internal stakeholders
- A review of competitors and their brand communications strategies
- A 360-degree review of touch points and other ways people experience the brand
- A review of brand communications and messaging
- A review of budgets and investment allocations

When it comes right down to it, however, the size and scope of a brand audit should be defined by the brand situation. Here are the determining factors:

- How much of an investment in a brand audit is practical?
- How many people need to be involved?
- What category does the brand compete in and how crowded is it?
- How big is the brand in comparison to its competitors?
- How far does the brand reach geographically?
- How is the brand sold, and how is it purchased?
- Who are the brand's customers and channel partners?
- Where is the brand in its lifecycle?
- How is the brand doing?

By answering these questions in advance, the brand audit is sure to deliver the kind of answers that you are looking for: informative, insightful, and actionable.

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