

That Sinking Feeling

To avoid slamming into a Brand Iceberg, CMOs must align the corporate message with organizational standards and behaviors.

By Stuart McFaul



The business straits through which companies must travel are hazardous. Every day, organizations navigate through a sea of competition, all racing toward similar goals. Some companies are larger, stronger and better suited for long journeys; others are smaller, faster and more nimble. But all can be damaged severely (or even sunk) by hitting an iceberg of their own making: their brand.

The majority of branding efforts are spent determining the "right" words and images with which a company wants to be associated. Companies use positioning statements, key messages, mission statements—all words—as the basis for their sales, marketing and communications programs. Using these words, companies then spend millions of dollars to develop ways to project their image visually, through corporate identity programs, advertising campaigns, retail displays and their websites.

By concentrating so much effort on words and images, however, companies only focus on the tip of what I call the Brand Iceberg. The foundations of the iceberg, those larger issues lurking below the surface, are a company's own standards and behavior. These are the elements most often missed in the typical branding conceit but, in the end, those that will affect the long-term success of the entire effort.

Standards (the rules put in place to reinforce the words) and behavior (how the company and its representatives act) ultimately affect a company's brand far more than mere words and images. Standards and behavior bring your brand actively and vividly to life, underscoring what the brand truly means to your customers.

Some companies, such as Southwest Airlines, have aligned their standards and behavior with their brand words and images; in many other cases, however, a company's standards and behavior are inconsistent with (or even contrary to) its words and images. These behaviors can take the form of rudeness, thoughtlessness or, at worst, greed and deception. Companies as diverse as Disney, Enron, Halliburton and MCI have run into their own Brand Icebergs. Some have come through unscathed; others have been irreparably damaged.

All Hands Not on Deck

Martha Stewart is an outstanding example of doing it right...and an even better example of doing it wrong. Everything Stewart did in building her empire suggested an instinctive understanding of the Brand Iceberg: She synchronized words, images, standards and behavior into brilliant lockstep to create an image of the domestic superwoman. But then her personal standards and behavior began running in opposition to the words and images she had cemented into America's mind. By not respecting her Brand Iceberg, she nearly sunk the Martha Stewart Omnimedia ship, as "titanic" as it was.

Every day, companies strike Brand Icebergs of all shapes and sizes. Here are two I experienced recently:

- As I stood at the front desk of a Fortune 500 software company, the receptionist spent six minutes on the phone (I timed it), ignoring me. Behind her, a sign proclaimed, "You are our most important customer."
- Because the website for my cell phone provider wouldn't take my (correct) password, I was compelled to call customer service. While a recorded voice continually assured me that they valued my business and time, I waited for 15 minutes and had to input my cell phone information three times before I reached a live person.

Both companies hit major icebergs. The software company's "customer first" statement carries no credibility whatsoever; my experience belies it. Do I believe my cell phone company wants to make my life better and easier, as it promises in its ads? Hell no!

Marketers spend much of their professional lives and millions of dollars developing and polishing the words and images of a company brand, all of which can be tarnished in a heartbeat by their lowest-paid employee—or worse, an automated system. We can promise that every experience will be like going into your grandmother's kitchen. But when a customer enters and finds a wolf in Grandma's housedress, is it any wonder she runs off screaming?

Five Ways to Melt a Brand Iceberg

A good branding effort creates expectations, raising a bar that the company itself is expected to scale. Smart marketers realize that effective branding is vastly more than just words and images. You have to practice what you preach by supporting words and images with the proper standards and behavior.

There are no shortcuts around your own Brand Iceberg. Here are five ways to help you navigate safely through these hazardous seas:

1. Align your words and images with your standards and behavior. This is a chicken-and-egg issue. Do you establish the proper words and images, and then adjust your standards and behavior accordingly? Or do you define your standards and behavior, and then create a message that aligns with them?

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It's difficult to adjust the behavior of an organization with thousands of employees, but the fact is that companies are regularly presented with new opportunities to realign their behaviors and standards to match their words and images.

These opportunities can be introduced by positive change (such as an acquisition, an IPO or a move to a new corporate headquarters) or by negative change (such as downsizing, poor stock performance or stringent new governance requirements).

Adjusting corporate standards and behavior requires close collaboration among marketing, operations and human resources and commitment across the organization, from executive management to the lower-level managers and employees. Allowing the rank and file to help define the standards and behavior that best align with the company's words and images is the most effective way to ensure that your company will walk the talk.

2. Be your own customer. Misaligned standards and behavior can occur at all stages of the customer experience. A CMO can develop a better understanding of these trouble spots by navigating through her company as a customer would, from beginning to end. If you can't do it yourself, hire others to do it for you, again and again.

The feedback is likely to be all over the map, but you can use it to focus on problem areas. Retailers do this type of research all the time with "secret shoppers," but any company would be well-served by making this approach a standard business practice. Seeing your company as customers see it is the best way to learn from their experiences, both positive and negative.

3. Teach your employees to practice common courtesy and to use common sense. If nothing else, preach the Golden Rule. While training may fall under the auspices of operations or HR, the truth is that marketing must drive this kind of education.

Look at the effort New York City has made in the past decade to improve its reputation as a tourist destination. The motivation for this change wasn't the need for everyone to be nicer to one another; it was that "friendlier" cities were taking a huge bite out of the Big Apple's tourist trade. That's a marketing driver, for sure.

A corollary to teaching common courtesy is allowing your people to exercise common sense. By empowering employees to make their own decisions, they will become more responsive to customers and not behave as automatons working from a script.

4. Set a good example. Executives often fail to realize that they are the dads and moms of the corporate family, and that their behavior sets the tone and pace for the entire company. Irascible managers encourage lower-level employees to behave in the same fashion.

Granted, this is a tough issue for CMOs to address: They can't simply demand better behavior from their peers in the executive suite. But they can conduct an independent "standards and behavior" audit to reveal problem areas in a nonconfrontational manner, then work with the executive team to address the issues.

5. Make sure that technology is a bridge to your customers, not a barrier. Voice-mail hell. Poor Web interfaces. Byzantine customer support systems. A lot of new technologies create standards and behavior that defeat effective branding. By all means, embrace technology. But use it to connect with your customers, not to push them away.

CMOs should create strong working relationships with their IT departments to ensure that IT's intentions match up with marketing's goals. By building the quality of the user experience into the implementation plan, technology can help your company avoid slamming into the Brand Iceberg. ■