

Creative B2B Branding (no, really)

Scot McKee

5 Forget the product (brand strategy development)

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

5 Forget the product (brand strategy development)

- ▶ The many faces of B2B boredom
- ▶ Product/service functionality is not your brand
- ▶ The value of showing your emotions, even in business

Writing it down

We've discussed this already. I'm going to risk repeating myself. Not because I have nothing better to say, but because it's that important. To capture messages and create concepts around which to build a creative brand, you need, more than anything, to understand the relationship between the product or service being sold and the 'thing' that the customer wants to buy. The 'thing' is rarely just or only the product or service you're selling. So if the product is all you have, if that's all you've got, you will fail. 'But this software really works...' isn't enough. 'Our accountants are totally qualified...' is expected, not exceptional. 'Our machines are small and cheap...' will offer temporary relief, until a competitor produces a smaller, cheaper one. 'Our recruitment company will find you a great job...' is a process that can be automated by a hundred recruitment companies. If your brand fails to excite or inspire your audience above and beyond the functional, you will fail. 'But actuarial risk assessment services aren't terribly exciting and inspirational...' is not an acceptable excuse. Excitement and inspirational creativity can be relative to the product or industry or most likely to the audience, but a brand needs to offer at least some degree of distinction if it is ever to be noticed. If there is no distinction, your customer might just as easily pick up the phone to your competitors.

Corralling a herd of squirming internal brand stakeholders and extracting information from them is no easy task. Comparing and contrasting those findings with the insight and revelations that the customer base may be prepared to divulge is equally fraught. The activity creates a certain sense of expectation. At some point, someone has to collate the information in such a way that the total becomes greater than the sum of its parts. A hastily compiled features and benefit list and a quick SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) isn't going to cut it. You will need fresh meat to throw to the lions. A coherent and new brand strategy is required if the step to creative communications is ever going to be made. The 'new' word is important. Not just because it will be new to the company, but because it will offer a new way of thinking for the company's future and that doesn't happen very often in a B2B context. A business can employ new people, move to new offices, design a new logo, launch a new advertising campaign – all with little real disturbance of the business thinking. Most of the time, the new things are actually just a continuance of the old thinking.

Product line extensions are the perfect example of old brand thinking in new brand clothes. The message starts innocently enough with 'New'. Then, some time later, it will change benignly to, 'Improved', from where it is but a small step to 'New and Improved'. Just when we thought it was safe to go back in the water, we will then be treated to the nostalgic return of the 'Original' version followed swiftly by the 'Classic'. Finally, when all creative thought has been surgically removed once and for all, the realization may dawn that the brand has become 'The New Original Improved Classic!' and the whole cycle can start again. Washing powder brands have been following this... wait for it... 'cycle' forever. We've tolerated over a hundred years of advertising for countless [washing power brands](#) and there's not a single new thought between them.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it might therefore apply to the washing powder brands – maybe they don't need any new thought. It could be argued that a B2B brand is even less likely to require new thinking. They are less visible and more risk averse. But for the brand development process to have started in the first place, the mandate for change must have been secured already. The brand strategy project can't start without it. You can't have a 'slightly new brand strategy'. It's all or nothing. Conditional within that mandate is the

Chapter extract

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