

Did you brand today?

White Paper

Marschallin+Sachs

Branding — an ongoing, everyday process

Brand and branding are terms bandied about by almost everyone these days. A company, product, environment, event — even a process — can have a brand image. But what, precisely, is brand, and how can an organization achieve it in everything it does?

One element of brand is corporate identity. While there is some dispute as to where the term corporate identity fits in, we'll use it here to mean — the fundamental tools that communicate the presence of a company or product (its name, mark, corporate color, and basic visual look). Corporate identity is a significant element in creating the brand image but there are many other factors. Equally important are the creative positioning of the brand, emotional appeal of the brand, endorsements of the brand, the corporate voice, and the public's idea of the brand.

Typically, branding consultants are involved in developing a brand and creating the key elements that support it. But every communication presents one or more branding opportunities. Since organizations usually cannot afford to have branding experts on staff, how do you make sure you are maximizing branding opportunities every day?

To examine this, let's create an example. Let's suppose we have been asked to create a print ad for a traditional home products manufacturing company. The company has long set the standard for quality housewares, but recently has been experiencing slower growth. To overcome this, the company decides to capture a greater share of the active young adult market. They create camp ware, a new product line of cooking equipment in "hot new colors" specifically engineered for camping. It is this new product that we are to promote. As we go through the example of how branding should be handled in a print ad, remember these same considerations are applicable to other communications opportunities — brochures, TV spots, press releases and event sponsorships.

Did you brand today? – 2

1. The message and its alignment with the overall brand

Key questions:

What are the specific messages this communication must deliver?

Are they consistent with the corporate brand?

If not, should they be, or can they be positioned somehow to reflect the brand?

The overriding brand messages of both the product and the company may be identical, but at the very least, they need to be compatible. If the brand message for our theoretical company is “producing quality for generations of Americans,” our task in developing a product brand message is fairly easy, because there is no serious gap to bridge in reaching the latest group of consumers. However, if the brand message of our company is “good old-fashioned,” we face a greater challenge. Nevertheless, there are ways to create a message that appeals to the younger audience and is compatible with the company message. For example, we could equate old-fashioned with quality or link camping to a return to simpler times.

The final message delivered by the ad must provide a strong, compelling brand position for the product. It must also take advantage of the existing company brand equity — extending and enhancing it. This is essential not only to sell the product at hand but also to define a position for the product line and the company in the marketplace going forward.

2. Tone and its likely effect on audiences

Key questions:

How is the message delivered?

Does it create an emotional bond with audiences—either building on an existing bond the company has with this audience or creating new bonds that will continue to appeal to audiences in the future?

Can we risk offending an established customer base with a piece that has the potential to build substantial sales volume for this particular product?

Probably the most difficult part of effecting branding in communications is identifying exactly the right tone. In developing a tone for our ad, we certainly have to look for a tone that will garner attention and not offend. More importantly, we should be seeking a tone that creates a bond between our products and customers.

Did you brand today? – 3

To do this effectively, we have to know the profile of our customers and potential customers. How can we reach the target audience without hurting business in other sectors or raising public ire? Would humor be most effective, a hint of the sensual, a serious tone, or a fact-filled approach?

Some tone approaches that might appeal to the younger audience we're targeting might be offensive to the company's traditional audience — an important audience after all, because the company still has to rely on this base for much of its business.

And the crudeness and sarcasm often used today might get the attention of our target, but might do long-term damage to the company's reputation in the eye of the general public.

For instance, a take off on the famous campfire scene from Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* might be an engaging way of showing our camp ware. However, we have to consider that some may find it crude, and while the scene is funny, it may ultimately fail to connect emotionally with customers. Is the humor's attraction worth the downside risk and does it foster a bond? Probably not.

On the other hand, a positive tone implying vigor, exercise, personal challenge and growth could get the attention of our target. Let's say we portray vibrant young people using the camp ware in a competitive hiking situation against the backdrop of a gorgeous landscape. Perhaps we could even include a well-know, enviable, young climber and his girlfriend. This tone might strike an inner cord: "These are my kind of people, doing what I want to do, where I'd like to do it. I can see myself there." The invisible bond is made: Buying this camp ware makes me part of this perfect picture.

Our decision must keep in mind that the manufacturing company has probably worked hard — and spent a great deal of money — to build a long-term perception as reasonable, reliable and professional. This is not to say the tone shouldn't be daring and creative. On the contrary, this is essential in today's marketplace. Yet, we must weigh decisions about tone carefully and vet them broadly, before moving forward.

Did you brand today? – 4

3. Creative concepts and quality

Key questions:

Does the piece show creativity and a sophisticated design sense?

Does it reflect the same qualities promised by the product—and the company (i.e., is it smart, focused and effective)?

Does the visual presentation reflect the brand position?

Does the style create an identity — an emotional environment or a specific sense of the corporate or product essence?

Every company should show itself to be creative. Clever approaches to communicating messages engage audiences, but they also say “these people are smart,” and by implication that they’re going to do things right. Some possibilities for clever—and apt—presentation of our camp ware might be: 1) showing it in a setting that recalls Manet’s famous painting of a risqué picnic (“Le-dejeuner-sur-l’herb”) or 2) as place settings for a formal dinner in a modern loft. Both creative concepts are sophisticated enough to underscore the company’s overall quality image, but edgy enough to attract the notice of our target audience.

These creative concepts hint at a tone of carefree sensibility, free-spiritedness, and slight rebelliousness, but are well within the boundaries of general good taste.

Having a clever concept is a good start, but it must be interpreted professionally in order to ensure the product’s long-term success and the company’s continued marketplace image. Professionalism in a creative piece is determined by uniqueness, design excellence, strong typography, well-executed illustration and/or photography and a layout that is balanced, well proportioned and restrained. A well-constructed piece should also adhere to the specific graphic standards prescribed for the company or product brand.

Make sure to pay particular attention to the artwork or photography. If it isn’t realistic or convincing, it can seriously undermine the advertising message. If it’s of poor quality, it may subtly imply to audiences that the company and its products also lack standards. Moreover, remember that graphic, photographic and artwork styles and techniques can become directly identified with the corporation or its products — the medium can become the message. Absolut vodka is the paramount example of a brand clearly differentiated by its overall conceptual and visual style. Examples of identifiable photographic styles that have had a major impact include the striking and forward-looking photos promoting Nike, the silhouetted images favored by Benetton and the classic black and white portraits used by American Express in its “member since” campaigns.

Did you brand today? – 5

4. Presentation context

Key questions:

Is the context appropriate to the product's brand message?

Does it appeal to the audience we're trying to reach?

Context is another area where we need to strike a balance between attracting the attention of our new audience and maintaining the loyalty of our traditional audience and the public at large.

Some context choices are simple. For example, running ads promoting our camp ware in a supermarket tabloid will likely do harm to the product and the company's long-established reputation — with both audiences. And promoting this hot new product in a traditional department store may dampen its appeal to young audiences who express their independence by shopping in specialty stores.

We are likely to be more successful if we place our ad in upscale, hip publications like Oprah's *O* and *TimeOut New York's* camping issue and consider a merchandizing partnership with Abercrombie & Fitch. This will attract the audience we want without saying anything jarring or contradictory to the audience we already have.

5. Social sensitivity

Key questions:

Is there anything about the piece that might offend a particular audience?

Has the piece been reviewed by a broad range of individuals who could identify any potential issues relating to race, color, national origin, religion, disability, age, sex or sexual orientation?

Has legal counsel reviewed the piece and found it fully in keeping with corporate legal mores, behavior and policies?

Is there anything about it that troubles you?

This is an area that can have tremendous negative impact on a brand. Let's depart from our theoretical product line and take a look at a real-life situation in which an organization did

Did you brand today? – 6

significant damage to both its company and product brand by failing to consider social context issues before running an ad.

The company was marketing a new chip dip through television ads. The ad they created showed a scene reminiscent of a Christian communion service. One of the characters in the ad stood like a celebrant priest, dunking a chip in the dip and placing it into each participant's mouth as they approached him. This desecration of one of the most sacred moments in Christian worship resulted in a broad public outcry and became a lightning rod for negative media coverage and "how low have we sunk" soul-searching. Not only did it become imperative for the company to pull the ad, but also a boycott was organized and the company and product reputation suffered sustained damage.

Of course, not all social sensitivity problems are so obvious. One business found itself in some difficulty after running an ad that showed a group of businesspeople casually sitting around talking. One man had his feet up on a desk. Shortly after the ad debuted, the company received several complaints from the Arab community saying that in their culture it was an insult to everyone else present to put your feet up as shown in the ad. While it is understandable how this occurred, failing to be acutely aware of culture sensitivities can have an impact on brand that ripples far beyond any immediate group we might offend.

6. Delivering on promises

Key questions:

Have you identified all of the promises — explicit and implicit — made by the ad?

Are all functions within your organization, including manufacturing, sales, shipping and customer support, prepared to deliver on those promises?

We hope our ad will help create a huge market demand for the camping cookware. But unless everyone on the delivery end is ready, the manufacturer hasn't done itself any favors. More customers are lost because of broken promises — perceived or real — than for any other reason. And once a customer has walked away, it is very difficult to get them back. Our hypothetical housewares company is well established, probably understands this, and is ready on all fronts. But the following are some steps they would likely take.

Did you brand today? – 7

Market test styles and colors.

Our manufacturer will want to make sure that the camping equipment is styled and colored to appeal to the audience it's trying to reach.

Build in product quality—to ensure products are up to legacy standards.

One potential point of failure in our example is in the difference between cooking over a campfire and a conventional household stove, so our manufacturer might have to test this camping cookware differently than their other products.

Ensure product availability—gear up manufacturing, contract sales outlets and plan shipment waves to meet seasonal ebbs and flows.

This is potentially a major problem for our manufacturer. Demand for most of the company's other products are likely to remain steady year-round, perhaps with a spike before June and before the year-end holidays. Camping equipment definitely has a cycle that needs to be engineered into overall factory capacity.

Train — and provide incentives for — sales staffs to sell the product.

The sales staff needs to understand the key selling points of any new product, and have good reason to steer customers to it. Few things are as self-explanatory as they seem, so it's wise to prepare some kind of sales training tool, even if it's only a detailed product fact sheet. The incentives, of course, will vary depending on the overall marketing budget and the sales outlet.

Familiarize customer support staff with the product and coach them to answer questions.

It's important to try to identify the range of possibilities in advance. Customer service reps should be prepared to answer every type of inquiry. In this case, everything from "What is the process for buying camping cookware for a scout troop?" to "Can the product still be used safely should it become chipped?"

All of these are operational issues, but they can have a major impact on the brand, its perceived value and the degree to which customers are loyal to it. Each helps fulfill the brand promise to the customer.

7. Identification considerations

Key questions:

Does the piece include a company mark that is clear, appropriately sized and positioned so that it's readily noticeable?

Does the positioning of the mark make the product offering and its relationship to the parent organization clear?

Has the appropriate contact information—including a web address—been included so that audiences can find out more about this product, the company and its other products?

In today's complicated communications environment, it is critical that each piece we create provide an instant snapshot for our audiences. This includes what the product is, who is offering it and how to get information about it. So our camping equipment ad would include the name, logo and contact information for the manufacturing company, in addition to the product's name and logo and where the product can be purchased or ordered.

Of course, these key items of information must be incorporated into the physical requirements of each piece and coordinated with its look, but in all cases, we should be able to pick them out readily.

This doesn't always mean that we should make the identity elements larger; this can sometimes create a displeasing visual effect and conflict with the primary selling message. There are other ways to make sure the mark and contact information are noticed:

- Position identity elements so that they are in a clear area, unencumbered with other graphic devices or messages.
- Align them with strong visual elements that will lead the eye to them.
- Place them in an obvious "signatory" area—where people will naturally look for this type of information.

Did you brand today? – 9

Make it a daily habit

Building a brand—whether for a one-hundred-year-old organization or for a product to be introduced next week — requires a great deal of forethought and coordination. It also takes a constant day-to-day effort in the field. Every print ad, letter, sign, television commercial, press release, and marketing event contributes to the final idea of the brand in the minds and hearts of a company's many constituencies.

Branding isn't easy, but we can be more successful at it if we approach it systematically and intelligently. Keep in mind the issues we've just discussed each time you face a communications challenge. Gradually, you will find yourself building brand intuitively and confidently.

©2003, Marschallin+Sachs, Inc. All rights reserved.

About Marschallin+Sachs

Marschallin+Sachs is an image strategy firm focused on corporate identity and branding. It is dedicated to helping its clients gain the bottom line benefits that come from strategically developing and deploying a powerful brand. The firm offers a range of services from creating new image programs to producing powerful single pieces, with particular expertise in using the latest electronic media to enable organizations to get the most from their brands. Clients include numerous Fortune 500 companies, mid-size businesses in a range of growth industries and cutting edge start-ups.

1133 Broadway, Suite 1330
New York, NY 10010
www.marsachs.com

T 212.647.8981
F 212.647.1670
E info@marsachs.com