The Nine Principles of Branding

Supplemental Information for the Branding Essentials Workshop

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Branding at a Glance

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The success of a product, service, individual, business, organization, or even a city is based on being perceived as unique. Look at any market leader and you'll find they each own a place in the consumer's mind. They have positively differentiated themselves from the rest of the competition. Branding is creating that individual niche in the consumer's psyche and owning it. More than just marketing, branding is the entire effect that creates a memorable identity.

A successful branding program is also based on differentiating yourself as unique. Effective branding creates a perception that there is no other product, service, organization or community quite like yours. Whether the distinction is a result of function, form, ease of use, price or prestige, the consumer believes you offer something exceptional.

For example, factors affecting the brand of an organization can be both tangible and intangible, including office décor, personnel attire, organization philosophy, product/service quality, design of printed materials and value-added services, just to name a few. It's everything people touch, see or hear that immediately sets you apart from the competition.

In other words, your “brand” is your image as seen from the outside. Your brand is who you are — your strength, your integrity and your reputation. It's not simply how your logo is displayed, but rather the emotional and intellectual response your logo elicits from your target audience.

Take Starbucks®, for example. When people think of Starbucks, several images instantly come to mind, whether you’re a coffee drinker or not: designer coffee, expensive, yuppie, casual atmosphere, one on every corner, green logo, etc. It’s no accident that these images flood our mind so quickly. These are brand qualities created by Starbucks to distinguish themselves from other coffee companies. Starbucks has created a consistent experience in every store, every ad, every employee and every cup of coffee they serve. Today, when people think coffee, they often think Starbucks. Not only does this translate into sales, it validates the company’s most valuable asset: the Starbucks brand.
Most organizations know little about branding. Therefore, you can get a leg up on your competition by knowing who you are as an organization and by being able to articulate it clearly.

Whether you are part of a nonprofit organization, a downtown association, or a growing business, you should be thinking about branding.

Brand yourself well. Take control of your image. The next time your name comes up, it will conjure the brand qualities you created and achieve the desired perception in the mind of the consumer. That’s the power of branding.

Stand out. Or stand aside.
Branding: What Is All This About, Anyway?

The world of advertising and marketing is full of meaningless jargon, design-speak and techno-babble that seems to be created for no other purpose than to confuse the rest of us. Years ago, when I first ran across the term “branding,” I thought, Oh no, another ad exec has written a book. However, I soon realized there was a powerful concept behind this word, and that "branding" was, in fact, a good name for it.

**Marketing Is Building a Brand in the Mind of the Consumer**

Let me explain branding by playing a simple word association game with you. I’m going to give you a word, and I want you to pay close attention to the thoughts that instantly come to mind after reading the word. Ready? The word is iPod®.

What happened? I bet you didn’t think of CDs or boom boxes. Did you think of Apple’s MP3 player? How about portable music from the Internet? Did you visualize the iPod or Apple® logo? Did you think cheap or expensive?

OK, let's try it again. This time the word is Kodak®. What happened this time? Film or pictures, right? Did you visualize the gold color of their packaging? Did you think cheap or expensive? Perhaps reliable?

This exercise illustrates the concept of branding. Apple and Kodak have created words that drive our perceptions when it comes to their brands. Talk about power.

Now let’s back up for a second. What happens when a new company is born? There are typically one or two individuals who start a company. When Hewlett-Packard® was six months old, what did people associate with their name? Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard — the people and their qualities were the brand. Now that HP® has grown up, what’s the most important asset in their company? The name Hewlett-Packard. If everyone at HP disappeared overnight and you and I had a bunch of capital and could start a new company with the name HP and its brand marks, don’t you think we would do okay? Of course we would, because the HP brand holds so much of the company’s value.

**How Does Good Branding Happen?**

From a business standpoint, branding in the marketplace is similar to branding on the ranch. An effective branding program is designed to differentiate your cow from all the other cattle on the ranch, even if all the cattle on the ranch seem to look very much alike.
A successful branding program is based on singularity. It creates a consumer perception that there is no product or service on the market quite like yours.

**Nine Branding Principles**
I have identified nine fundamental qualities of a good branding program. I’m sure there are more, but these are my favorites:

1. **Keep It Simple**: one big idea is best.
2. **Mass-produced word of mouth (PR) builds brands.**
3. **Focused brands are more powerful than diffused brands.**
4. **Somehow, some way, you have to be different.**
5. **The first brand in a category has a huge advantage.**
6. **Avoid sub-brands at all cost.**
7. **Quality is important, but not as important as the perception of quality.**
8. **Be consistent and patient. Building a strong brand takes time.**
9. **Put your brand definition in writing, otherwise you’ll get off course.**

In the following pages, I expand and explain these principles in detail. ☞
Branding Principle #1: Keep It Simple

One of the most common mistakes that marketing and advertising people make is they say too much. I understand why this happens. A world-class product or service is difficult to create, and there is a lot to communicate about why your stuff is better than everybody else’s stuff. You’re proud of it and you don’t want to leave anything unsaid. However, the reality is that if you say too much, no one will listen.

People Are Overwhelmed With Sales Pitches

I’m not suggesting that you dumb down your communications or assume your audience isn’t smart enough to get your message. On the contrary, my assumption is that your audience will get it, but only if they care about it.

Think of your daily routine. How many times during a typical day are you confronted with a sales pitch of some kind? You wake up, have a cup of coffee, read the newspaper, and turn on SportsCenter or CNN. In the thirty minutes you sit there, you see thirty print ads in the newspaper, eighteen commercials on TV, and an ad on the back of your cereal box. This doesn’t take into account the product packaging of the coffee, the milk and whatever else you looked at in the kitchen. You’ve been up for thirty minutes and you’ve been pitched up to fifty times — and the assault continues all day until you get back into bed. You will probably see between 500 and 1,000 marketing messages throughout the day.

With the advent of TiVo® and other digital video recorders, people can now skip commercials altogether. A lot of advertisers are afraid this is going to hurt their brand, but the reality is, we have already trained ourselves to tune out during television commercials.

So, with all of this advertising saturation, how will your message be heard above the din? A common strategy used to create a standout message is through humor. The thought is that most people stop and notice funny ads. Studies conducted by the advertising industry show this to be true.

It’s similar when using sex appeal as a strategy. Human beings are driven biologically to notice beautiful people. Advertising and media executives figured this out a long time ago and use it to full advantage to get our attention.

If it were that simple, we’d be using humor or sexuality in every campaign. The problem is that a truly funny or sexy advertisement often has no connection with the product or service it’s supposed to be promoting. Sex can sell beer, perfume or clothes because in our minds we can make the leap that somehow sex might be connected to
drinking beer, wearing perfume or wearing beautiful clothes. Showing a pretty girl with a glulam beam or data encryption software doesn’t work because people won’t make the leap (glulam beams are sexy?).

The same is true with humor. Budweiser® uses a lot of humor in their advertising, which is effective because people can link humor and beer in their minds. DIRECTV® also has done a series of humorous TV commercials that poke fun of their own product and the people who buy it (300+ channels is kind of absurdly funny in itself). But try and use humor to market vitamins or semiconductor manufacturing. You might make people laugh, but they won’t remember what you’re selling.

The only other effective way to separate your message from the noise is to be focused, personal and simple. Your consumer must choose to pay attention. Your message must be a simple message, because our attention spans don’t last very long.

*Just do it.* Powerful, personal and simple. The imagery supports this simple message. Someone at Nike® resisted the urge to say more. “Just walk, run, bike, ski, swim, shoot hoops or lift weights,” says more, but who would have listened?

*It’s everywhere you want to be.* The simple message: you can do and go where you want because you have a Visa® card. They’re selling freedom! Again, powerful, personal and simple.

*Like a Rock.* Chevy Trucks® — they’re solid and dependable. We all understand the message.

**There is a Time and Place For Details**

There are a lot of benefits and features that make companies and products successful. Potential buyers want to know this information, but they’ll only listen to it after they are already interested.

We work with Harrell Remodeling, Inc., the premier residential contractor in the San Francisco Peninsula area. They do a lot of things right in their business, but the most important thing they do is take immaculate care of their clients during the remodeling process.

The ads we design for them are about their clients and the way they are cared for. “At Harrell Remodeling, we never forget it’s your home,” says it all.

After seeing an ad that generates interest, a homeowner will want to know about certifications, design awards, and the fact that employees own stock in the company. They’ll want to know that HRI does both design and construction. We wait to give them these details until they have expressed interest. That’s what websites and follow-up information packets are for.
It Takes Courage And Skill To Present A Simple Message

Why doesn’t every company follow this rule when marketing their products or services?

Our clients are often too close to every detail to identify those most important to their customers. It’s an odd clashing of concepts. To build a world-class organization or product requires attention to every detail. When it comes time for marketing, my job is to say, “I realize that most of these little things are really cool, but only one big thing is going to get people’s attention.”

It’s also scary to push everything aside and hang your hat on one concept. For some reason, it feels safer to say a lot, in the same way it may feel safer to bet more than one number at a roulette table. In both cases, what feels safer is actually more risky. I’m sure the person who presented the “Just do it” concept for the first time was worried that Nike might think it was too simple or that it didn’t mean anything.

Another reason it’s hard to keep it simple is that the message is often complicated. One of our clients is a of the leading developer of data encryption software used by banks and financial institutions. And believe me, this is really complicated stuff because the world of banking and e-commerce is a complicated place. We decided to use the tagline, “Prime Factors, Inc.®, Your key to data security,” which is a fairly simple concept. Basically this company is selling peace of mind. How will we reach the marketplace with a message that says this in a simple, believable way? What words and images will we choose that will allow us to keep the message simple and easy to grasp?

This is a challenge, but, one way or another, if you want people to listen, you have to find a way to keep the message simple.
Branding Principle #2: Mass-Produced Word of Mouth (PR) Builds Brands

During the dot com era, I heard the following joke: “Dot coms are nothing more than a secret conspiracy designed to transfer wealth from venture capitalists to advertising agencies.” Ouch! It was supposed to be a joke, but today it doesn’t sound so funny. Many hotshot companies attempted to build a powerful brand through advertising and it didn’t work. Why not?

It’s Very Difficult to Build a Brand Through Advertising Alone

One of the many lessons to be learned from the dot com era is that a pile of money cannot buy name recognition and brand awareness. In their book, The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding, Al and Laura Ries make the following statements:

“The birth of a brand is achieved with publicity, not advertising.” And continuing on that thought, “Once born, a brand needs advertising to stay healthy.”

Though not always true, these bold statements deserve consideration. Most of the dot coms that attempted to build brands through advertising failed. They spent their advertising budget and then we forgot about them (I doubt that many made it into our minds in the first place). The few that remain built their brands through the media.

Amazon.com® and CEO Jeff Bezos were everywhere in the media for a while. Time Magazine®, 60 Minutes®, Newsweek, talk shows...all sorts of local and national media were interested in their story. They did a lot right and a lot wrong, and so did many other dot coms. But did you notice Amazon’s fourth quarter of 2001, when everyone else was dying? They posted sales of $1.12 billion with a net profit of $15 million! Did you catch that? This dot-com was making a profit way back in 2001. Why Amazon and not the others? One big reason is that they got into our minds by making news.

A Great PR Program Is Easy and It’s Hard

The fundamentals of building a great PR program do not change, whether you are Amazon.com and you’re selling to the world or you’re a small business selling to your local or niche market. I use some simple rules when developing great PR programs for our clients.

If it’s newsworthy, you can create interest. Sending out press releases of the latest new employee or the latest promotion is one common approach — and a really boring
one. Is this news? Maybe to the person that just got hired or promoted, the people they work with, and those in the world that may want to sell them something, but outside of those ten people, who cares? Nobody.

I look for good human-interest stories such as: An Award Winning, World-Class Residential Remodeling Company Awards Ms. Fix-It Badges to Girl Scouts. Or A Trombone Technician Has Been Fixing Horns for Forty Years. Or A One-Legged, Deaf, Marathon Runner Designs Shoes for the Disabled.

I also look for innovation and information, and then tell the stories behind them: Top Glulam Manufacturer Creates a Beam School for Training Builders and Suppliers. Or Branding: What Is All This About, Anyway! Or The Five Keys to Data Security in Today’s Computing Environment. Or Oakridge: The Branding of a Small Town.

The goal is to deliver prepackaged news to the media for publication. Or, better yet, you want to spur their interest and generate questions about your company or your products.

**You need to help the writer.** Most companies don’t have effective PR programs. Why not? Because while it’s easy to delegate ad creation to an outside company, the creative process of making news takes your input and focus. You know the inside story, and we need your help finding it.

Our clients who do this the best actually feed us ideas for stories and articles. We encourage our clients to suggest ideas for stories and articles, and get the best PR results this way.

**You must have great visuals.** Remember, the content within newspapers and magazines is no more than the stuff between the ads. These businesses are attempting to gather or create interesting and appealing articles that attract readers so people will also read the ads.

Great photography is very appealing to print media. Good photography is expensive, and more and more people are supplying do-it-yourself digital images with PR, which is often unsuitable for high-quality print applications. Great photography stands out, and your news article is much more likely to be published if it is accompanied by good images.

**The Results of a PR Program Are Not Always Predictable**

This is the scary part for most people. If you are content to be a single hitter, be content running ads and sending out press releases about new employees. But you won’t score many runs [or get much attention] that way.
In an aggressive PR program, sometimes in an attempt to make news, we strike out. But we can hit home runs too. You don’t get many ads that run on the front cover of a magazine, but it is possible to have news land there. We’ve seen articles that we’ve written published multiple times in different publications. Most articles end up with multiple pages within a magazine, including the great photos I mentioned earlier.

**The Payoff Is There**
Try comparing the exposure generated with PR vs. advertising, and PR wins almost every time. Consider this example:

- The cost of a full-page ad ($5,000) and the readership it generates.
- A well-written article and photography ($2,500) that may end up spanning three to six pages in the same publication.

The value is more than the number of pages. People read the articles and skim the ads. We also generally believe the articles and mistrust the ads. In the above comparison, I’d say that effective PR is 10 to 20 times more valuable than the advertising. Don’t get me wrong, advertising does play an important marketing role, but you really should have a great PR program.
Branding Principle #3: Focused Brands are More Powerful

One of the goals of a powerful branding program is to create a memorable concept. And to stay in people’s minds, you must first get inside. This requires focused, sharp and to-the-point branding. How do you do this?

Define Your Brand
Make a list of every quality that describes your company:

• Are you big or small?
• Friendly or whimsical?
• Expensive or inexpensive?
• Durable or disposable?
• Local, national or international?
• Red or purple?

You get the idea.

This list of qualities becomes what I call a brand definition. For my clients, I always create a written brand definition to use as a measuring stick to evaluate marketing materials and strategies. In any organization where there is more than one decision maker, personal taste often interferes with effective marketing. To prevent this, I ask the following question when presenting any proposed marketing material to a client: “Does this communicate your brand qualities?” The answer to this question is always a good starting point for making better decisions.

If you spend time working on this, you will likely come up with a long list. Try to narrow it down afterwards. What qualities describe your brand in a way that’s different from the competition? If the key to success in fast food is “location, location, location,” then the key to branding success is “differentiation, differentiation, differentiation.” So, what makes you different from the competition?

Different Is Better. When I was a kid, I read a survey where people were asked to name both their favorite and least favorite sports announcer. Howard Cosell was at the top of both lists. Why? Because he was different than everyone else and people remembered him (fondly or not).

Look at Apple Computer® and the great work Steve Jobs has done since his return in 1996. At the time, Apple products were no longer different than all the other PC clones on the market. What did he do? He threw out the old, familiar design and came up with a whimsical, original design in a variety of colors. Some people think they are ugly; some people ran out and scooped one up right away. Most importantly, everyone knows they’re made by Apple. (By the way, those offbeat computers saved the company!)
Focused and Different is Even Better

Remember the K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Stupid) principle? Fred DeLuca opened a delicatessen that has only one type of sandwich. Howard Schultz opened coffee shops that only sell coffee. Charles Lazarus owned one store called Children’s Supermarket, which sold two things, children’s furniture and toys. Then he got rid of the furniture. These three businessmen focused on a single quality product, resulting in three highly successful brands: Subway®, Starbucks and Toys "R" Us®.

It’s easy to fall victim to trying to be everything to everyone. After all, you want the business and you know you can do a better job than someone else, right? Perhaps you can, but in order for a brand to claim a permanent space in the consumer’s mind, the brand needs to retain focus, not become muddied with clutter.

Loss of focus can occur in two ways. It happens with emerging companies that don’t yet know what product or service is going to sell best, or established companies that once had a focus and are now trying to corner the market on everything. In both cases, this lack of focus becomes their downfall.

For an emerging business, the fear of failure is almost always present and it’s scary to “put all your eggs in one basket.” Diversification feels safer, but it’s actually a much larger risk. You are better off finding a focus for your brand and putting all your efforts into it. You’ve got to get into the mind of the consumer, and you can’t do that with a scattered message.

With an established business, diversification is rarely a good strategy for the brand. In fact, it will most likely result in a weaker brand. For example, Jaguar® is now producing “affordable” Jaguars. FedEx® is now a copy center. Microsoft moved into video games. History suggests that these efforts won’t result in a stronger brand.

If you want to increase sales through diversification, you’re better off creating another entirely different brand. For example, Toyota® and Black & Decker® fared well by promoting Lexus® and DeWalt® to high-end markets. There might be a short-term market for an affordable Jaguar, but will it be big enough to justify destroying the Jaguar brand in the long run?

It takes courage to be different, but that’s what it takes to become successful. To quote branding guru Al Ries, “Good things happen when you narrow your focus.”

Now, back to that list of qualities. Which qualities on your list have the most focus? Which qualities are different from your competition? Narrow your list down to five items or less.

If done correctly, this final list will be the essence of your brand. A good agency will help you create the words and images to communicate your brand, but your success will depend largely on your ability to stay focused. ☞
Branding Principle #4: Differentiation is Key

Awhile back, I sat in on a sales meeting of one of our clients. This particular company manufactures and sells a series of products that compete in national and international markets. I asked the group of salespeople gathered around the table, “What makes this company and its products different from your competition?”

They looked at each other, and said, “Nothing.” After further discussion, their perception was that theirs was a commodity product, and they competed in their market based on price and product availability. I knew then that my role was to help them find a way to be different.

Ideally, your product or service is what sets you apart from your competition. Whether it functions better, looks nicer or rides smoother, these qualities can serve as the wedge that separates you from your competition. Sometimes, however, this differentiation is not so obvious or perhaps not present in a functional way at all. What should you do then?

Make one up!

That’s right, make one up. This is not to say to lie about your product or service — that would be a big no-no. But if you have no apparent distinction, find something different and connect that to your product or service. From my own experience, a great example of such differentiation within a commodity market is Gans Ink®.

Many years ago I was in the printing business and purchasing ink was a matter of course. As is the case with many products, as far as I could tell, ink was ink. None seemed particularly better than any other ink and for the most part, price was the deciding factor. Gans Ink, however, found a way to be different.

When packaging their ink to be shipped to customers, among their products and packing peanuts, they would include a handful or so of Tootsie Roll chocolate candies. One might ask, “What do Tootsie Rolls have to do with ink?” Well, to borrow a quote from my group of sales guys, “Nothing,” but that really doesn’t matter. When a Gans Ink package was delivered, the entire shop would come to a halt and search through those Styrofoam peanuts and ink tins to find the small treats. The sweets made people happy, and that happiness was directly linked in their minds to the Gans Ink brand. Talk about effective marketing!

While the Gans Ink itself is not significantly different than others [although some loyalists might argue differently], Gans gained an advantage because people enjoyed
the treats. Even if slightly more expensive, Gans still had an edge because they had become different in the purchaser’s mind. They were the ink with Tootsie Rolls.

Of course, eventually there were imitators. I saw companies include jawbreakers and other assorted sweets in their packaging, but they were seen as followers. People thought, “Oh look! They’re trying to be like Gans!” Once again, my Branding Principle #5 (First Brand Advantage) proves itself.

Another good example of a company forcing a brand difference is Cricket Communications, a small wireless communications provider. Cricket has chosen to advertise prominently in a number of regional consumer markets, targeting mid-size college towns. If you live or work in one of these areas, you’ve probably seen their lime green couch. Communicating “comfortable wireless” with a talking couch may seem a bit preposterous compared to Verizon’s “Can you hear me now” guy and Sprint’s deadpan trench coat guy, but it’s great marketing because it’s spectacularly different. While they’ll probably never overtake Sprint or Verizon, the couch is finding its own comfortable niche.

Another extremely good example is the California Raisin ad campaign of years past. Driven by a consortium of raisin growers in California, this group created a brand to promote their commodity product, and the singing California Raisins were born! Where before raisins were just raisins, the “Heard it through the Grapevine” advertising campaign was so successful that it essentially created a new kind of raisin in our minds — a California Raisin.

The media attention that resulted from the phenomenal popularity of those commercials created a brand for this commodity. (The revenue generated by the raisin-man toys was actually more than the cost of the “Grapevine” ad campaign during that time period.) Other products at the time began supporting their brand by touting, “Made from California Raisins,” with Raisin Bran cereal being one example.

The California Raisin Marketing Board continues today to support this brand with its latest angle, “Look who’s cooking with California Raisins.” While this campaign may not be as successful as the “Grapevine” campaign, the war has already been won. We, the consumers, have a sense that California Raisins are in some way different than the rest.

If nothing else, these examples prove we should learn that you shouldn’t limit your thinking. Open your mind and find a way to stand out and take a chance, even if it’s unrelated to your product. On an even playing field of commodity markets, those that separate themselves in the minds of their prospects are the ones that will have the most success.»
Branding Principle #5: The First Brand Advantage

What makes a company or product a market leader? Surprisingly, it’s not the quality of the product or the size of the marketing budget. Most often, it’s about being the first one on the scene. Not simply first on the market, but first in our minds.

Nothing Beats Being First

Tylenol was the first brand of acetaminophen pain relief medicine. Coke® was the first carbonated cola drink. Polaroid® was the first manufacturer of instant developing cameras and film. FedEx was the first company to ship packages overnight across the U.S.

These companies and their products succeeded in being the first to claim space in our minds. Some invented something and were actually first, while others started behind but did a better job of marketing, beating the competition in the consumer’s view.

Tylenol is often the only acetaminophen brand on the shelves, other than generic store brands. While we understand that generic and Tylenol brand acetaminophen contain the same ingredients, most of us will still spend the extra dollar for a bottle of Tylenol. Even the tampering scare in the 1980s couldn’t kill this powerful brand. Being first in a category is so powerful that companies must really stumble to get knocked from that position in the marketplace.

FedEx invented the next-day shipping model, and in many ways owns the concept of next-day shipping. People even use the name as a verb, i.e. “Please FedEx this package.” FedEx was the first to capture this market and more than 30 years later is still the market leader.

Coke was the leader and had a huge share of the marketplace when Pepsi® made its first big run with “The Pepsi Challenge” in the 1970s. Pepsi’s brilliant campaign succeeded in separating them from the pack (remember Tab®?), but Coke still outsells Pepsi in the U.S. and around the world.

So, You’re Not First. Now What?

Obviously, not every product or company can be first. What then, you ask? Well, second isn’t too shabby either.

Over time, the top two brands in most categories tend to dominate the lion’s share of the market. Pepsi’s may not have been able to topple Coke as the market leader, but competing with Coke helped them increase their market share and grab second place in the category.

Hertz® is the leader. Avis® tries harder. McDonald’s may have invented fast food but Subway “invented” healthy fast food. Burger King® flame broils it. Budweiser is the king of beer, and Miller® is a strong second.
A strong second is not a bad place to be in the world of business. Buyers like choices, just not too many. If you have a chance to become second in your market, compete hard against the leader and promote your overall category. You may never become No. 1, but you can be very successful at No. 2.

**So, You’re Number 11?**
For companies and products that aren’t in first place and don’t have a clear shot at second, there’s another option: make a new sub-category and become No. 1 in that category.

Here are some examples of how the bigger brands became No. 1 in a sub-category:

- In the broad category of pain relief, Tylenol became the first acetaminophen.
- In the broad category of bottled or canned drinks, Coke is a carbonated cola drink.
- UPS® dominated the parcel shipping market. Federal Express® ships overnight.
- Kodak is the leader of photographic film.
- Polaroid is the leader in instant film.

Recently, I’ve noticed this tactic in a high-profile national advertising campaign. If you’ve watched any TV at all in the past few years, you’ve probably come across the “Jared” Subway advertising campaign. When I first saw these commercials, centered on a goofy guy who’s losing weight by eating at Subway, I thought they were really stupid. They made no attempt at sophistication, and the nerdy Jared was a constant source of jokes for my teenage kids.

After the Subway campaign had been running for awhile, I was with my kids at the mall. We were in the food court trying to decide which fast food to eat. One of my kids said, “Hey, let’s get something healthy and get Subway.” At that moment, I realized what a brilliant move those dorky, tacky commercials were. Subway was way down on the list in the fast-food market and so they created a new category, healthy fast food, and became the leader of that category. In fact, Subway recently passed McDonald’s in the number of locations worldwide!

One way or another, figure out how to be No. 1 (or No. 2). Once you are there, promote yourself and your overall category. You’ll expand the market and with it, your position at the top will be secure.


**Branding Principle #6: Avoid Sub-brands at All Cost**

“The easiest way to destroy a brand is to put its name on everything.”

Al and Laura Ries - *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*

One of the most common mistakes made by marketing professionals is relying too much on sub-brands as a means for introducing new products or services. Often referred to as line extensions, this marketing strategy not only usually fails to create a market for the new product or service, but the parent brand also suffers as a result.

This statement may surprise you because you see sub-brands everywhere. Coke was followed by Diet Coke, Cherry Coke, New Coke and Vanilla Coke; 7 UP® was followed by Diet 7 UP, Cherry 7 UP and 7 UP Gold; FedEx Overnight was followed by FedEx Ground and FedEx Kinko’s; United Airlines® was followed by United Express®. While some of these companies have successfully introduced sub-brands, don't be fooled into thinking that it’s the right way to go. Failures are common; successes are few.

When scholars have studied the successes and failures of the strategy of line extensions or sub-brands, the initial success of a sub-brand is usually followed by not only the decline of the sub-brand, but the parent brand as well. The net increase in sales is often zero or less than zero (the sales of the sub-brand are offset by reduced sales of the parent brand).

For example, no industry has as many sub-brands as the beer industry. In the 1970s there were three major brands of beer: Miller High Life®, Budweiser and Coors®. Today, these three brands have split into at least 14 different brands. In addition to Miller High Life, Budweiser and Coors, there is Miller Lite®, Miller Lite Ice, Miller Genuine Draft®, Miller Genuine Draft Lite, Miller High Life Ice, Bud Light, Bud Ice®, Bud Ice Light®, Coors Light®, Coors Extra Gold Lager, and Coors NA just to name a few.

Have these 14 brands increased their market share over the original three? Only slightly. Even with the amount of advertising and marketing these companies have done over the past 25 years, the per capita beer consumption has not changed.

So why do otherwise successful and intelligent marketers make this common mistake? The answer is easy: false logic. Read on.

**Don’t Rely on Past Success for the Future Growth**

You have a successful product or service because you’ve created a strong brand and have created customer loyalty. You’ve earned your customers’ trust. The strategy of
sub-branding (in theory) is that by using your successful brand you can launch a new product. It makes sense in this manner. Marketers think people will recognize the brand and trust the new sub-brand.

The problem is that the new brand is just that: a new product. Sub-brands usually benefit initially from the parent brand recognition. The trust is initially transferred. The problem is that the goal of branding is to create a special, singular identity that people can connect in their mind with your product or service. That's what good brands do. Using a sub-brand not only dilutes the focus of your parent brand (it's no longer special), but the new brand never has a chance to have a truly focused identity (it's never special).

There Are No Shortcuts to Building a Strong Brand

You can't get around it: it's difficult and expensive to build a great brand. Sub-brands are great for making next quarter's sales report look good. In this era of managing for the short-term, people often look for quick fixes like these instead of the long haul of brand building. The smarter, long-term plan, however, is to apply the same branding techniques used to create your successful brand and create a new, completely distinct entity. Many very successful companies do this very effectively and we don't notice (we just buy their stuff).

General Mills® owned a successful chain of family seafood restaurants called Red Lobster® and they wanted to reproduce that success, but with Italian food restaurants. The new brand? Italian Red Lobster? It sounds stupid, but I wouldn't be surprised if someone considered something like it. Luckily, their marketing people had more sense and branding savvy and came up with the Olive Garden®.

Other examples? Luxury cars from Toyota: the Lexus. Pro-model Black & Decker power tools: DeWalt. And consider chewing gum. The next time you stand in line at the grocery store, look at the gum on the rack. It's almost all made by Wrigley®. They have a virtual monopoly on chewing gum but we don't care because they understand how to build brands. Powerful, strong brands have individual personality and are not the light version of something else.

It's Often About Courage

Steve Jobs, Apple's CEO, is one of my favorite brand builders for this very reason. He has failed very publicly, more than once, but he is still successful. Why? Because he's willing to take risks, be different and shake things up. While it doesn't work all the time (Jobs created the Lisa computer and landed on the cover of Time Magazine® with this huge public flop), when it does work, it works big time (he created the Apple II® and the Macintosh®—both the original version and the iMac® family and the iPod). Jobs knows that being unique is key to gaining industry share.

I believe that often the lack of courage by many of our peers is the real reason there are so many weak sub-brands in the marketplace. Everyone seems to want a safe way to go. And like so much in life, especially marketing, the safe way really isn't really all that safe. 😊
Branding Principle #7: Perception vs. Quality

“We don’t need marketing! This product is pure quality and will sell itself!” How many times have you heard this? How many times have you believed it?

Every day, buyers like you and I make judgments about quality. But how much of our assessment is due to the actual quality of the item? Not much, I’m afraid. It’s not all about quality, but the perception of quality that really counts.

If It’s Well Branded, It Must Be More Valuable

Last spring, I was with my family at a nursery picking out flowers and plants for our yard. At one point, I found myself putting a bunch of plants in my cart and making the assessment, “These plants look like they’ll grow really well — they’re so healthy looking.”

The funny thing was, the only difference between these particular “healthy” plants and the rest was that they were in plastic pots that had branding on them (the name of the nursery and a slogan). Someone had done a nice job with the graphic design, using simple, industrial, one-color printing, and I, the president of a marketing and branding company, had immediately concluded, “These must be better, healthier plants.” Well, they cost more than the other “generic” plants, and while they were probably no better, all I could think was, “Only the best for my family and me.”

A common reaction, this kind of response illustrates exactly what branding is all about. Branding sets you apart in the consumer’s mind as unique, and therefore more desirable and valuable. This is also why many companies have different brand lines for the same product. They know there are some people who look for no-frills merchandise for the least money. But they also know there are those who will pay for nicely designed packaging because of the sense of quality and status it conveys. For example, how much more do we pay for brand names in over-the-counter drugs? Twenty-five percent more. Most of us know it’s the same stuff in the other bottle but we’ll pay extra for the brand name.

If There’s No Magic, It Must Be Cheap (Poorly Made)

Many years ago, I was walking through the aisles of a large hardware and lumber retailer looking for a toolbox. When I found the toolbox section, I quickly began looking through the selection, trying to find one that would serve my needs. Some were too small and some were too large, so I quickly narrowed it down to two medium-sized toolboxes.
The first one was made of metal, and the second one was made from some type of heavy-duty plastic. I quickly decided that the metal one was “cheap looking” and, since they were priced about the same, I picked up the plastic one, and turned to head toward the check stand. Then I caught myself, and stopped.

Why did I make this decision? I looked again at the metal one, and, being realistic, determined it was much more durable because it was made of metal. But down the corners of the box I could see the rivets where the edges of the metal had been connected, and a truth occurred to me at that moment. I assumed it was poor quality because I could picture how that toolbox was made.

Think about things that you assume are of high quality. Can you picture how they were made? Look at a nice car and show me a bolt or a screw head without opening the hood. Look at the interior of a nice home: smooth, seamless walls as if they appeared by magic.

More than just the aesthetics of a product, though, the “magic” is also enhanced through marketing efforts aimed at the consumer. Take a box of Cheerios® for instance: those wondrous little o’s that are so good for us. Focusing on the simple shape and its properties, for years Cheerios has told us that the hole in the center is where all the “bad stuff” isn’t, or that they rise to the top and float in milk. Marketed as a whole-grain oat cereal, does the average person really know what that means? Along with that eye-catching multi-colored box, this is all part of the Cheerios strategic marketing plan to imbue magic into the product, and we’ll pay over $4 for a box because we believe it’s worth it.

So how is something like oatmeal supposed to compete? While oatmeal doesn’t have the allure of formed shapes and bright packaging, smart marketers find the magic in the simplicity of the oats. They appeal to the romantic side of human nature that remembers a simpler time where nature provided everything the body needed without all the preservatives and additives that are in so much of today’s food. They take advantage of the idea that the oats were grown in sun-drenched fields of gold, covered in blue sky and are packed full of rich goodness. This is their magic. If the masses weren’t fed this perception, how boring would oatmeal be?

It’s Often About the Quality of the Service, Not the Quality of the Product
Over and over again, the marketing studies we perform for our clients reveal interesting results. We conduct brand studies to better understand customer perception of our clients and their products. When we ask customers to rate the quality of our clients’ products, they often give high marks. But when we ask why they feel this way, they tell us stories about the service behind the product. The reality is that most buyers equate the quality of what they’re purchasing with the way they are treated.
About a year ago we performed such a survey for one of our clients, QSL Print Communications, a high-end commercial printer. We found that this company is very much loved by its long-time customers. When we asked them why they rated the quality of QSL’s work so highly, almost everyone talked about the way they were treated by the staff, not about the quality of the work. A few customers even talked about the one time that QSL had made a mistake, noting that the company bent over backwards to make things right. It was that experience that solidified their relationship and earned the customers’ trust.

Dell Computers® has learned this lesson well. People judge the quality of Dell products to be very high. The reality is, they just answer the phones and take care of people better than everyone else.

If It Costs More, It Must Be of Higher Quality
Often, the price tag is a major contributor to the perception of quality. We are quick to connect the cost of something to the value we place on it. Our judgment of the quality may change based on other factors, but the actual cost is indeed an important factor in influencing the perception of quality.

In my opinion, Mercedes Benz® are ugly, overpriced cars, but they are perceived as high-quality automobiles. It is almost impossible to separate the value of the product from the actual cost in our minds. We immediately assume that the lowest-priced item is of least quality, and that the most expensive is of the best quality.

Often, marketers and salespeople are afraid of their product being branded as “expensive.” Indeed, it can often be an obstacle to a sale. But then again, can the perception of being branded “poor to medium quality” be an obstacle? Of course. When given the choice, some people will always select the cheapest option, some will always pick the option in the middle cost range, and there are always buyers who will go for quality and pay more.

For Long-Term Success, It Really Should Not Be an Illusion
Please don’t get me wrong; I am not endorsing smoke and mirrors. Image isn’t everything. For success to be real and lasting, the perception of quality must be a reflection of actual quality. A key to good branding is to communicate the important qualities that are actually experienced by the user or buyer. If you are selling quality, there had better be real quality to sell.

But the larger point I am making is that just because you have quality to sell, that alone doesn’t mean that anyone will notice.
Branding Principle #8: Be Consistent and Patient

If I say “Oatmeal,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind? A round package? Maybe. Health food? Maybe. But more likely, when I say “Oatmeal,” you’ll picture the friendly face of the Quaker Oats® man — branding at its best. The story of Quaker Oats should be a reminder to all of us to be patient, because building a strong brand takes time. But it’s sure worth it!

Quaker Oats registered the first U.S. trademark for a breakfast cereal in 1877. Interestingly, the trademark was registered by the U.S. patent office as “a figure of a man in Quaker garb.” At the time, the image was a line illustration of the entire person but the “Quaker man” is clearly recognizable.

In 1915 the familiar round Quaker Oats package was introduced, and in 1946 the familiar smiling portrait of the Quaker man was introduced as the new trademark for Quaker Oats. Finally, in 1957, a famous Chicago artist updated the 1946 line drawing to the full-color portrait of the Quaker man that we see on the package today.

Think about it. In the 125 years since they created their brand, Quaker Oats has only slightly altered their brand concept (it started out as healthy, oat, breakfast food, and it still is), and has slightly modified the basic look of their brand mark only twice! In 125 years! And not at all in over 50 years.

What’s the result? Total domination of the oat cereal category, and that was true 50 years ago. Name another oat cereal. Do you see any other round packages in the cereal isle of your supermarket?

Why doesn’t every company do this with their brand? It seems easy, but it’s not.

Know Who You Are and Write It Down

You’ve got to know your brand and what benefits your products or services provide in order to consistently present that message to the marketplace. Often, with personnel change comes a change in vision. These new ideas can ruin a good brand.

Do you have a corporate style guide? Are your brand qualities written down? In order to stay on target and present a consistent image in the marketplace, you must institutionalize your brand within the organization. Otherwise, when you have change in personnel, invariably your brand will change. People want to make their mark and, no matter how talented they are, the brand focus and image will change. And with branding, most of the time change is not good.

Consistency and focus are the keys to long-term success.
Don’t Get Bored
People often forget that the rest of the world is not looking at your logo or brand mark everyday like you are. I find that the more creative an organization, the more often they tinker with their logo. Resist the urge to “play” with your brand. It’s more important to present an imperfect image consistently than it is to present a changing image that might be “better.” It’s got to be really broken to be worth fixing.

The city of Portland, Ore. is a perfect example. Many know Portland as “The City of Roses.” That is no longer the city tagline. In the late 1990s, the city administration re-branded Portland as “The City that Works.” To many in the city government, that must have made sense, but from a branding standpoint, it was a bad move. It will never stick in the minds of the average person, nor will the “City of Roses” because they no longer promote it.

Often I find that the companies and organizations that can resist the urge to play with brands are those led by individuals who don’t think of themselves as creative people. CEOs and presidents with backgrounds as engineers, programmers and manufacturers usually lack the urge to let people tinker with the look of their brand. Whereas CEOs and presidents who are designers or salespeople at heart often bore easily and want change, sometimes monthly!

With a lack of consistency and a lack of focus, there will be no brand.

Who Are the Brand Police in Your Organization?
If you have a well-defined brand and have written it down, who is the enforcer? In any organization, no matter how small or large, someone must have the responsibility of being the brand police. Because likewise, in every organization there are perfectly wonderful people who find a creative outlet by using the company logo in new and creative ways – and they must be stopped!

There must be someone to say:
“That’s the wrong font.”
“That’s the wrong color.”
“The brandmark is too large in that context.”
“That’s not our tagline.”
“That’s the wrong focus.”

Where were the brand police when they decided to promote FedEx Ground (and change the colors, no less) and FedExKinkos?

Whether the brand police are inside of your organization or outside (at Polaris, we play that role for a number of our clients), there must be someone willing to speak up and say “No, that’s not right.” Someone must have the authority to stop people from
doing things that don’t communicate the brand. It’s not always a fun job, but like proofreading, it’s a necessary one.

**Building a Strong Brand Takes Time**

Over the last 125 years, don’t you think that there must have been more than one bright young marketing person at Quaker Oats who wanted to do something different? How many ways can you be creative with the Quaker man? The solution: pick up a few other new products and give those marketing guys down there something to do.

“Go play with Gatorade® or Rice-a-Roni®.”

Unless someone does something really dumb, 100 years from now our great-great-great-grandchildren will still be eating oatmeal and looking at the face of the Quaker man, because that company has its branding figured out.
Branding Principal #9: Write Out Your Brand Definition

Despite changes in marketing directors, personnel or ad agencies, your brand must stay constant. Every modification will weaken your position in the consumer’s mind. So the question is: throughout the many upheavals of a company’s lifecycle, how do you keep your brand on target?

The answer is simple: write it down and use it.

Earlier I mentioned Quaker Oats and how in the past 100 years, they have only changed the basic look of their packaging twice. An amazing accomplishment, this constancy has been a big part in making them an icon for Americana and one of the best-known brands around. I’m not sure exactly how Quaker Oats has managed to keep on the straight and narrow, but I do know how we do it with our clients. The key is to create a written brand definition and institutionalize those qualities into your company.

What Is a Written Brand Definition?
Many think of a written brand definition as mission statement or a positioning statement. It is very different from these, and often much more powerful. For example, the following is a typical company mission statement (only the names have been changed):

“Acme HR is a full-service provider of Human Resources Services. Established in June 1987, we are an integral part of the XYZ family of over 1,000 offices. We are committed to the highest standards of integrity, excellence and performance in dealing with both client companies and candidates. OUR MISSION IS TO BE THE BEST AT IDENTIFYING, QUALIFYING AND DELIVERING TOP TALENT FOR OUR CLIENT COMPANIES, WHILE ENHANCING THE CAREERS OF OUR CANDIDATES.”

Besides posting this on their website, how valuable a tool can this be?

A brand definition, on the other hand, works for a company on a regular basis. It defines not just what they do, but who they are and who they want to present themselves as. It can serve as a yardstick from which to judge everything from their marketing materials, to their office space, to their employee’s dress code. A brand definition for the same company might be:

- Head-Hunter (Management Recruiting Firm)
- Expensive
- Easygoing, friendly and enjoyable to work with
• Personalized, customized care
• Established, accredited and award-winning
• Based in Florida, but part of a global network
• Specializes in specific industries (healthcare, software, engineering and finance)
• A full selection of services

If I were working with this company, I would tell them that every marketing decision made in the company should communicate these qualities. Since they are priced above much of their competition, their website and their marketing materials should look expensive. People shouldn’t be surprised when they see the prices. There should be images of relaxed, friendly people everywhere (“Easygoing, friendly and enjoyable to work with”). Their collection of services should be clearly spelled out (“A full selection of services”), as should be the industries they specialize in (“Specializes in specific industries”).

In fact, decisions made about non-marketing issues should also be made based on the brand definition. Should this company have a voicemail phone system answer when you call, or should a real person answer the phone? Based on this brand definition, I would say a real person. Should they be entering award contests? Yes. Should they be expanding their global network? Yes.

I encourage our clients to use their brand definition as the compass for keeping their companies focused and pointed in the right direction. One of our clients (Iris Harrell, a brilliant CEO in the San Francisco Bay Area) even keeps a small, printed version of her brand definition affixed to her Palm Pilot. This excites me because I can see in her words and actions how committed she is to her brand. As a result, her entire company understands who they are and the special qualities and experiences they offer their clients. Consequentially, they really deliver what their marketing promises.

**Decision Making Becomes Easier**
Another phenomenon that happens when you have a written brand definition is that you now have a set of criteria to base decisions on. I have seen marketing people and departments crippled because they are all making decisions based on personal taste. People will say, “I’m not sure if I like dark blue as our color,” because they don’t personally like dark blue. A written brand definition should be the test. Does this color communicate your brand qualities?

In the example I used above, dark blue would most likely NOT be appropriate for their main color, since dark blue tends to communicate conservativeness and seriousness. We’d be looking for warmer colors that communicate their “easygoing, friendly” qualities.

It’s all about your brand. If it’s not written down, it’s going to change without anyone making a conscious decision.
Don’t Stop There...
Once you have a written brand definition, you need to look at institutionalizing the parts of your marketing communications that communicate your brand.

**Visual Style Guide:** Control the use of your brandmarks (company and product marks) by writing down the style in detail. Whether your company is large or small, you should have some kind of style guide. If you don’t have one, start small. Include your official logo and a technical description of the company colors [i.e. PMS numbers]. Value the time your graphics design team needs to put this together. You’d be surprised how many times I begin working with medium-sized, otherwise mature companies and find that they have lost track of the original artwork for their logos.

As companies grow and more people are involved with the visual branding process, a thorough, written style guide becomes essential. Include everything from photography style, to control of storefronts and interior fixtures, to people’s clothing and appearance in the office or at a trade show — it’s all part of communicating your brand. Part of your brand is visual. Don’t underestimate the value; control it and manage it.

**In-House (Writing) Style Guide:** This is just as important to your brand as anything else. All your company literature, from marketing materials to advertising copy to inter-office memos, represent who you are as a company and should be consistent among themselves. For most companies, it is sufficient to refer to one of the major stylebooks and make a smaller, more customized in-house style guide for company publications. This normally entails outlining a standard format for various company documents, as well as addressing those problems most often encountered in their production. This kind of guide should be available and strictly enforced for anyone who writes anything that might make it into general circulation.

**Who Serves as Your Brand Police?**
When all is said and done, maintaining a clear and focused brand is really difficult. It just is. Not only do you need to write down the rules, but, as I mentioned earlier, someone needs be the brand cop. If you’re going to take the time to write the rules down, you’ve got to have someone with the power to bust people who break them. I guarantee that if you don’t, you’re losing focus and your brand is becoming weaker. We serve this role for many of our clients, and others have someone internally who serves this role.

Don’t you think that sometime in the last 100 years, someone at Quaker Oats got bored with the familiar Quaker Oats man and wanted to spice things up, but something or someone stopped them from wrecking their brand? Do you think it’s written down? You bet. They have been so good at branding that I think that we could write it down [oats cereal, healthy food, makes great cookies, moderately priced, found in a round box with the face of a Quaker man on it]. This is the kind of strong identity that every company should be shooting for.

So define your brand, write it down and enforce it. ☰
Discovering More Than Just Your Brand

I have helped many companies improve their marketing efforts by applying branding principles. In order to apply those principles, each company must know who they are so they can communicate a consistent message. This is true of both new and well-established organizations. While simple enough in theory, brand studies, from small, internal ones to large, client-based studies, almost always yield surprising results. Few companies anticipate them, but they always appreciate them.

Don’t Make It Personal

Over the years, I’ve worked with many company owners, managers, marketers and other decision makers who made choices about ads and brochure designs based on personal taste. Taking excessive time as debates raged over colors and layouts, and ultimately creating a mish-mash of styles and messages, theirs brands had become muddled and inconsistent. To solve this, I encouraged them to be clear on what they wanted us to be communicating through the design. While choices over colors, design and layouts are very important and should be carefully considered, these matters should be based on whether they communicate the company’s message and not just fickle personal preferences.

This coaching technique has worked well and it has allowed us to do higher quality, more consistent work for our clients. “Let’s be clear on the message,” I have said quite a few times, “and let the writers write and the designers design. You may not prefer royal blue yourself, but it may help communicate the conservative nature of your business.”

As I began working with larger organizations that have more decision makers, I found it even more important to keep them focused on the message and not the layout. People have different tastes, but I found that it was possible for them to agree that a certain design best communicated their message. After pushing personal taste further from the decision-making process, their marketing and communication tools dramatically improved.

Define Your Brand

In my mind, brand qualities should describe a company, product or service the way you might describe your child to a friend. When you think of FedEx you think of: next-day shipping, expensive and professional business shipping.

For Starbucks, you might think: designer coffee, expensive, yuppie, casual atmosphere and a location on every corner.
I encourage our clients to develop such brand definitions and to use them as a compass for making marketing decisions. This is an especially good tool for keeping new companies on track. Established companies should also do this exercise, but shouldn’t stop there. They should also look to their clients to see how they are really perceived in the marketplace.

**Brand Studies Are More Than a Marketing Tool**

Brand studies let us speak to our client’s customers, ask them key questions and learn what their customer experience really is. While a company may think they know how their clients perceive them and what is important to them, more often than not our brand studies have provided surprising results.

Time after time, we have had an experience that goes something like this:

Our client hires us to do a customer-based brand study. During this process, we interview (by phone) a few dozen of their core clients and create transcripts of the conversations (with the identities hidden to preserve the confidentiality of the interviewees). We summarize these conversations and boil it all down to a list of “what they care about” – a first draft of a brand definition.

Next, we have a meeting with our client, including as many of their key people as possible, and sometimes the entire company. We present our findings and refine the brand definition with them.

During this presentation we spend the time covering every question from the interview [Why do your most loyal customers love you? What don’t they care about?]. We then discuss the answers we received. It may seem tedious, but it never is. After all, these are their customers talking through me.

There’s always something that totally surprises the group. Often it’s that their customers don’t care about things that our client thinks are really important. Other times, their customers have told us they would pay more then they currently do [and our client thinks they are already too expensive].

Once we have worked through the interview results, I teach them a little about branding, and then turn to the brand definition we created from the interviews. “Is this who you are?” I ask, “Is this who you want to be?” And we alter the brand definition until we reach consensus. If I do my job, we end up with a very simple list of brand qualities that sets them apart in their marketplace.

And here’s where the amazing thing happens. I ask the following question of the group:

“These are the qualities that we want to use to promote your brand. First, we need to be sure that the brand delivers these qualities every time. Does this happen?”
By this point, everyone in the room is thinking about how their role impacts the delivery of the brand experience to their customers. People start talking about the problems they have. It then becomes clear what the group objective should be: to deliver the brand experience.

I have seen people with interdepartmental issues work together because they’ve realized it helps effectively deliver the desired experience to their customers. I have seen community members in a small town drop their personal pet projects in order to support their community’s brand.

I have gone into many such meetings hoping only to persuade people to stop messing with our designs of their brochures, only to watch them get excited about their company. Months after these meetings, I still see the reverberations of this branding experience within the team. It’s really cool to watch, and fun to be a part of.

Something I didn’t expect is happening because of this process we created, and I’ve realized it’s happening for one simple reason...

**They Have Become Client-Centered Organizations**

Because the brand developing process is built around client interviews, it’s as if their clients are speaking to them.

People can discount the opinion of coworkers, their bosses or even the CEO, but people accept the reality of the customer experience. It doesn’t lie. A company may make the best widget in the world, but if their customers don’t think so, they react with, “Huh?” And they quickly accept that they must be doing something wrong and begin to figure out what to do.

To control a customer experience tightly enough to create a powerful brand requires limits on individual behavior. There are rules and style guides that people must follow. There are procedures to follow in order to duplicate the experience from one customer to another. People often resist this control.

But in a client-centered organization, everyone understands that the client’s experience is always real, and everyone should be listening. My experience is that an open discussion of branding within an organization can be a powerful way to focus everyone’s eyes on the client.

It must happen within your organization if you are to consistently deliver your brand experience.
About the Author

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Greg Stine is the founder and President of Polaris, Inc., a West Coast-based branding solutions company specializing in the development and execution of comprehensive branding strategies. With more than 15 years of experience in branding and business management, he is also a professional speaker, delivering seminars and workshops all around the country. Greg specializes in teaching CEOs and marketing managers of growing, mid-sized companies to identify, develop and coordinate all aspects of their brands to deliver one unified message to the marketplace and increase sales.

The former owner of a printing and graphic design business, Greg shifted his focus to branding and marketing when founding Polaris, Inc., in 1990.

Greg’s work redeveloping struggling communities in Oregon has garnered him recognition from both regional and state governments. He is a regular presenter at many conventions and associations, and has published numerous articles on management, sales and branding.

Continuing to develop and refine his strategies as the market changes, Greg plans to remain president of Polaris as the company continues to grow and expand.

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