

Building Trusted Brands Requires More “Left Brain” Thinking



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by John McKeever, Senior Vice President, Gelb Consulting Group

Most brand failures are not the result of poor quality creative work, but an unclear understanding of what matters most to customers. This is usually a function of a brand development process guided by creativity rather than a solid foundation of fresh market insights. And if the brand is the means by which customers make choices, shouldn't organizations commit resources to research before launching into a creative process?

Best practices suggest that high performance brands are built around a solid understanding how customers make buying decisions. To build the foundation, objective, primary marketing research (i.e., left brain thinking) should be conducted.

Any objective brand research should seek to understand the way customers make decisions using rational and emotional criteria. Rational criteria drive loyalty in the form of a continuous cost/benefit analyses (i.e., customer value). In addition, consumers distinguish one brand from another based on a set of emotional factors – traits like sincerity or competence they see in the personality of a brand (i.e., competitive difference). And the brand becomes “trusted” once an organization consistently delivers on promise reflected in those two dimensions.

Some companies attempt to short-circuit the learning process with workshops or executive interviews. This myopic view leads to stale ideas and runs the risk of flawed brand positioning.

But conducting meaningful research doesn't necessary mean a quantitative survey. In fact, conducting in-depth interviews is a meaningful way to develop insights into what motivates customers. Robust quantitative surveys are often warranted when there is a large set of customers or opportunities for market segmentation exist. An added advantage of the quantitative survey is that it allows the organization to measure the performance of the brand over time.

M-I SWACO, a leading oilfield services company, used an information-based approach to develop its brand strategy in 2003. Instead of relying solely on a creative agency to guide their decisions, they turned to market information. Through a series of customer and employee interviews - using both qualitative and quantitative research techniques - they built a base from which to develop their strategy. And the results were outstanding.

Research showed that customers and employees wanted more integrated operations and the fulfillment of engineered solutions rather than selling products and services separately. Customers were in dire need of a comprehensive fluids and drilling waste management solution. It also excited employees to know they were part of the same team, with a common sense of purpose.

To develop the strategy, management was led through a series of activities to leverage the information to, construct a brand promise, brand positioning statement and set of strategic messages. This output was then delivered to the creative firm for execution.

“Without the market research to provide the foundation, we would still be debating the merits of various ideas on the table,” concludes Mike Zoril, Director of Marketing at M-I SWACO. “The entire brand initiative was structured around the information rather than a creative process.”

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The results for the M-I SWACO brand initiative have been stellar. Using the initial research as a baseline, the marketing team demonstrated the impact of their branding initiative. Employees surveyed agreed that integration was the best course of action for the company and that they were more satisfied because of it. Customers also gave M-I SWACO high marks in terms of brand trust, so much so they indicated a willingness to pay more for its products and services.

The brand’s promise is interpreted by consumers and delivered by employees; it’s a two way street. The relationship between an organization and its customers should be the primary focus of brand strategy development. Understanding what customers expect is a critical part of the creative process. Organizations can only do this using a whole brain approach.

Exhibit A-Guidelines for “Whole Brain” Brand Development

Learn about what motivates your employees and customers

Support the brand strategy with a solid foundation of marketing research that includes a comprehensive review of the market – internal and external perceptions as well as competitor messages.

Use the appropriate marketing research tools

Brand research is an established discipline that is distinct from customer satisfaction measurement or awareness/attitude/usage studies.

Position the brand effectively

Use this information to identify credible positions for the brand to reside – what are the white spaces? What are market needs? How does your brand fit? Can you deliver consistently?

Develop a cogent strategy

Write and distribute a strategic document that outlines how customers make buying decisions, how you create value, why they should buy from you, and how you will deliver the customer experience.

Let the strategy guide design

Develop a creative brief that outlines the brand personality and desired perceptions so that your creative team can execute effectively. This should stimulate creativity and provide a means to evaluate creative output.

Monitor the results

Measure the effectiveness of your brand strategy and adjust the positioning over time, as necessary.

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Endeavor Management, is an international management consulting firm that collaboratively works with their clients to achieve greater value from their transformational business initiatives. Endeavor serves as a catalyst by providing pragmatic methodologies and industry expertise in Transformational Strategies, Operational Excellence, Organizational Effectiveness, and Transformational Leadership.

Our clients include those responsible for:

- Business Strategy
- Marketing and Brand Strategy
- Operations
- Technology Deployment
- Strategic Human Capital
- Corporate Finance

The firm’s 40 year heritage has produced a substantial portfolio of proven methodologies, deep operational insight and broad industry experience. This experience enables our team to quickly understand the dynamics of client companies and markets. Endeavor’s clients span the globe and are typically leaders in their industry.

Gelb Consulting Group, a wholly owned subsidiary, monitors organizational performance and designs winning marketing strategies. Gelb helps organizations focus their marketing initiatives by fully understanding customer needs through proven strategic frameworks to guide marketing strategies, build trusted brands, deliver exceptional experiences and launch new products.

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