

Branding – much more than a name

Ever been in doubt about the importance of on-line brand building? Its significance is demonstrated by the latest research showing that 65% of Internet users arrive at their desired Web site by direct navigation. Dick Stroud and Stephen Bedford discuss the basics of on-line brand development.*

About the Authors: Stephen Bedford is a director of the Marketing Consultancy, Conical. He is a CIM course director and author of a wide range of articles on marketing and service quality issues. He can be contacted at sjb@conical.co.uk. Dick Stroud is a CIM course director, specialising in Internet marketing. He also teaches at the London Business School. He can be contacted at dick@internet-strategies.co.uk

What's in a name?

A brand in its simplest form is just a name, a means of giving an identity to an organisation. Something to add an address and a phone number to.

This seems over simplistic but for many firms this is the source and nature of their brand. However, to see a brand as no more than a tag is to miss the point. In a competitive market the brand needs to be able to convey a sense of the company's values – the essence of what makes the company different.

The start point is to agree what these values are. This can be the hardest part. Most companies want to be seen as being 'client focused', 'innovative' and 'approachable'. All of these are laudable objectives but these words often degenerate into meaningless platitudes. Sometimes these values are reasonably well communicated when it comes to brand identities and marketing communications items. This is typically the result of an able marketing team supported by good copy writers and graphic designers. This is a useful start and helpful when trying to be noticed and differentiating the company, but if everyone in the market place is trying to communicate the same values then true differentiation will not be achieved. As such those interested in building a strong and distinctive brand need to delve deeper than the obvious values like being 'client focused.'

The most important fact to realise is that the vast majority of employees have an ability to positively or indeed negatively affect the brand. So no matter how good the brochures, web site, brand identity or web site are at conveying a set of brand values all we be undone if the customers' experience is at odds with the company's visual identity. The obvious conclusion here is that branding is as much an internal communication issue as it is an external one.

Brands do not replace people

No matter how complex the graphical representation of a brand, no matter how well stated the brand values are and no matter how clever the use of imagery is, people at all levels are the 'brand guardians'. This conclusion applies to all companies but particularly those in the services sector.

Senior management, not just marketers, need to agree their corporate values and then ensure they are built into the fabric of the organisation. In practice this will most likely mean a full review of recruitment, induction, internal communications, appraisal systems, reward systems through to the obvious marketing communication items. This makes the management task of marketing professionals particularly difficult in that it pulls them into the traditional realm of Human Resources.

Getting the best value from your marketing expenditure

The mantra of today's marketer is 'if it moves, measure it'. For many marketers 2003 will be remembered as the year of 'Return on Investment' (ROI). As trading conditions deteriorate, marketing is under intense pressure to justify its expenditure, especially on brand development activities. An article in the FT (29th April 2003) described the way that the marketing department at O₂ (the mobile phone operator) has its bonuses linked to brand awareness targets. In the same article the CEO of the Chartered Institute of Marketing commented that 'marketing rather than financial targets are increasingly driving business performance'

The Web and e-mail provide the marketer with a wealth of metrics about the way the user responds to different variants of design, copy and functionality. On-line techniques provide the marketer with a level of finesse and responsiveness that cannot be matched by advertising, PR and the other traditional brand building tools.

The Web Site must reflect the brand values

Research conducted by WebSideStory* shows that 65% of people now go directly to their desired site, which is a 34% increase from the same study conducted in 2001. The traffic generated by search engines and Web links whilst still important is declining. Getting your target audience to recall and act upon your brand is a core issue for the marketer.

Having created brand awareness and stimulated the visitor to your Web site you had better ensure that your site then meets their expectations.

Professor David Akker, a leading branding guru, believes that companies must adopt a 'holistic' approach to brand building, especially when related to using Internet. This means developing and implementing a branding strategy that incorporates all aspects of the way a company interfaces with its clients. What specifically does this mean in the context of how a company uses the Internet?

The five rules to using the Web to enhance your brand.

1. The starting point for using the Internet is to have a well defined off-line brand strategy. The Internet will amplify the good *and* the bad parts of your branding. If your approach is poorly defined then it will be visible to the visitor to your Web site and those receiving your marketing e-mail. Both your on-line and off-line branding activities must have a common and well defined foundation.

2. Branding is more than an attractive looking Web site. Too often the issues of branding are limited to the ascetics of a Web site's appearance and ensuring the same colours, images and fonts are used as in the printed materials. Not only is this a relatively small part of the branding mix it can be dangerous.

Paper-based images and fonts can be unsuitable for use in the on-line world. The Web is littered with 'brochureware' Web sites that are unattractive and unusable versions of the corporate brochure.

Another common mistake is to use the Web to project a more 'exciting experience' by using complex graphics and animations. This invariably leads to frustration for the site visitor as they are forced to endure flashing graphics that provide no added value.

These are the other ways your branding can be enhanced, or ruined, by the way you implement your on-line strategy.

- *The style, format and content of your marketing e-mail and the manner and speed with which you respond to client enquiries.* Too often the creation of this e-mail is left to staff with no expertise in copy writing or design. Too often the first contact a potential client has with a company is receiving a standardised and delayed response to their enquiry.
- *The type and style of the content that your Web site contains. Site content must reinforce the branding messages that your site contains.* For instance, if a company portrays itself as a specialist in a particular area of business then the content must support this claim. Defining and maintaining Web site content is often seen as the tedious and un-exciting part of Web marketing. If it is not properly funded and integrated with the other on-line techniques it will undermine the brand building strategy.
- *The usability of your web site.* The cosmetic appearance of site is soon forgotten if it is then difficult to navigate and search. There are too many Web sites that proclaim how the company is 'easy to do business with' but then provides visitors with unfathomable navigation that manifestly does not recognise how the site will be used.
- *Controlling and exploiting the company's domain names.* Establishing the memorability of a company's domain is vital part of an on-line branding strategy. Too little time and importance is attached to this task that is often delegated to junior members of staff to make the critical decisions. There are two important issues associated with the use of the domain as a branding mechanism. Firstly, ensuring that all parts of the company use the same domain name conventions. Secondly, implementing a set of naming standards for the sub categories of the main domain name. The BBC is a perfect example of an organisation that has uses this approach (e.g. Using the 'slash category' to follow the main domain - www.bbc.co.uk/business)

3. On-line branding must reinforce the off-line activities. One of the key advantages of the Web is the speed at which the content it can be changed, making it an ideal mechanism to support traditional brand promotion techniques. Brand building using advertising, sponsorship and PR should all be supported by the use of the company's Web site. Companies spend marketing effort in using these techniques to generate awareness only to waste it by providing no support through their Web site.

4. Use the Internet to demonstrate to clients to the company's full range of services. Very often clients have a narrow view of the services a company provides. A client's knowledge is often limited to the services that were provided at the initial engagement. The Web, used in conjunction with e-mail, is a perfect way to demonstrate to the client the other areas of expertise of the company in a far more efficient way than traditional paper based techniques.

5. A superb brand strategy is useless unless clients and potential clients are made aware of its existence. Often a disproportional amount of marketing funds are spent in the passive aspects of branding and too little in the pro-active promotion to the target audiences. The Internet provides a wide range of techniques for reaching the desired audiences. Some of the ways this can be done are by using subscribed e-mail, optimising the web site for search engines, 'pay by results' use of search engine and on-line advertising. There is no shortage of mechanisms for connecting with the desired audiences. It does require management's recognition of the importance of actively engaging the target audiences.

The Internet provides a company with a very powerful and relatively inexpensive toolset for brand building. Like all other techniques it is requires a clearly defined set of brand values that are reinforced across all the touch points with the potential and existing clients.

Google understands brand building

Whilst the theory for using the Web, to enhance brand awareness, is relatively simple there is a worrying shortage of companies we can observe that have manifestly 'got it right'.

Google is such a company. It is almost certain that you have used or at least heard about Google. Just in case you have yet to discover this marvel of technology here is thumbnail sketch.

It is really is quite simple - Google is probably the world's best Internet search engine. From its birth in 1998 it now handles approximately 40% of the world's Internet searches and is able to deliver the results to its users in an astonishing 0.3 seconds.

The company has spent virtually no money on advertising, yet Interbrand's BrandChannel.com voted it the brand of year, displacing last year's winner, Apple and beating Coke and Starbucks. According to research from the branding consultancy Brand Keys, Google has the highest brand loyalty of any online company. To achieve its premier position it had to displace Yahoo!, a company that was thought to have an impregnable lead as the market's top search facility. It has done all of this in a viscously anti-technology environment whilst creating a company estimated to be worth around \$1 Billion.

So what is Google's secret**? There are four brand related things the company have done very well.

Keep things very, very simple. The Google home page contains 32 items of text, including all of the navigation. Its core brand value is to be the world's best search web site and it allows nothing to deflect it from this goal.

Know what your customer want and give it to them. The company's site has equal appeal to the novice and the most experienced Web user. This does not come about by accident but results from clarity of vision about the needs of the customer and continually innovating to meet their requirements.

Get others to promote your brand. Google has actively encouraged other companies to incorporate its search facilities in their own sites. This is driven by a belief that when people use your services they become brand advocates.

Don't take yourself too seriously. On March 6 the Google logo had changed into a stone sculpture with the letter 'L' being replaced by the Michelangelo's Statue of David in celebration of sculptor's birthday. On Valentine's Day it had changed again with the two 'Os' being placed with interlocking hearts. The continual adaptation of the logo is a perfect demonstration of the company's 'serious but fun' image.

How these techniques are implemented will be different for all companies but the underlying sentiment is universal.

*www.websidestory.com 6th Feb 2003 'Web Branding Takes Hold As Direct Navigation Is Most Popular Method For Delivering Users To Web Sites'

**A longer article about the Google can be downloaded from www.internet-strategies.co.uk/google.htm