

Branding: Make it Personal

By Mark A. Nead

The debate over differentiation between personal and commercial branding is an interesting one, as the range of viewpoints vary significantly, not unlike the many varied definitions of ‘branding’ itself. If you subscribe to the belief that a brand is far more than a logo, tagline, or attractive package, but rather, a promise of expectation, the parallels between personal and commercial branding are many.

Before identifying parallels, I offer the following thoughts on the competitive (commercial) brandscape as we know it today. It's without surprise that a good majority of branding ‘gurus’ and consultancies define brand theory relative to products, rather than to companies who sell the intangible — services delivered to businesses and/or consumers. The difference is that it is far more challenging to build and sustain a service-based brand, as opposed to that which can be housed in an elegant package and displayed prominently on a shelf or online store. Because a business-to-business or business-to-consumer service is delivered by people, the brand inherently has many points of interaction, for better or worse. A carefully managed and nurtured service-based brand will reap the benefits of strong, lasting relationships built on trust. To the contrary, a brand left in the hands of individuals not empowered to fulfill their role in delivering exceptional client experiences will quickly become irrelevant.

Regardless of whether you sell products or services, a significant opportunity exists to build a strong brand through the promise of a consistent and valued brand experience. It comes down to one key element — people, and how they manage the brand experience over time. Too many companies fail to capitalize on the most overlooked opportunity in brand management: upholding their brand promise and demonstrating responsibility in managing problems or conflict. How many experiences have you had with a company that delivered an excellent buying experience, but before you could sing their praises, you realized you had fallen for their bait & switch routine? The problem is that too many companies, especially middle-market and larger, simply will not make the necessary investment in people and resources to ensure a positive brand experience throughout the life of the relationship. They fail to recognize the value of investing in long-term brand equity. Many of these companies who once fought relentlessly to outgrow their large competitors to become the biggest on the block are now struggling in their efforts to want to appear small in order to compete against their smaller rivals who can deliver faster, more personalized, richer customer experiences. Again, the key is the people providing these brand experiences.

Our buying decisions are largely based on trust and emotion, and this is where the lines between personal and commercial branding are blurred.

Was Ken Lay a direct influence and reflection of a brand called Enron? Is the Apple brand a byproduct of the vision and innovative thinking of Steve Jobs? Of course. This brings to mind the debates that occurred during the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal years ago, and the argument that the personal “activities” of the President should have no bearing on, and are separate and distinct from, his role as the nation’s leader. Who were we kidding? No matter what perspective or political camp you view this from, they simply cannot be viewed as separate and distinct from one another. As individuals and organizations, we are defined by our values and actions, and it is these values and actions which define our brands, personally and professionally. Fortunately you can’t fake character or values, and technology has become a driving force in demanding transparency and disclosure. Word of mouth marketing has overshadowed and replaced traditional advertising. If you subscribe to and remember one principle of branding, make it this: your brand is not what you say it is. It’s what others say after you’ve left the room.

A strong brand foundation and strategy is essential to the success and effectiveness of businesses as well as individuals. It helps build connections with your audiences and enhances your ability to “own” a category in their minds. This sets the stage for others to become your brand “ambassadors”, which is the most effective means to promote and grow your brand. Nurture the power of referrals with care and respect.

In my mother’s effort to help develop my self-confidence as a kid, she used to say “Don’t worry about what other people think.” While this may have been sound advice, there is another rule that should always follow: “Be empathetic and conscious of how you make other people feel.” We must take responsibility for our immediate and extended worlds, from our colleagues to our customers, from our employees to our family and friends. And most importantly, for ourselves. Deliver value. Accept that your brand, personal or professional, is constantly being evaluated and measured. Be true to yourself and your brand. Make mistakes, and always look for opportunities to improve “brand you.”

About Boondock Walker

Boondock Walker is a best-in-class Brand Strategy, Design and Technology firm, headquartered in a restored 85-year-old historic warehouse in the heart of Midtown, Cleveland. Our vision — to guide clients to discover their own distinctive values, connect with their audiences, and create powerful customer experiences.

The firm is led by partners Mark Nead, and Brian Willse, who represent a combined 40+ years of experience in graphic design, brand development, strategic communication and business writing. Considered a new breed of branding and design firm, Boondock Walker is powered by a broad network of strategic thought partners, design visioners, and staunch advocates for meaningful brand strategy and design.

For more information, call Mark Nead at (216) 431-9301 x12, or visit Boondock Walker online at www.boondockwalker.com.