

ways to cope with information overload, and to simplify the choices that we make in managing our daily business activities.

Promises, promises

Strong brands make it easier for us to make choices — they are promises that we can depend upon when trying to get a specific job done. We don't have to worry, we know what to expect — so the choice of a supplier for a product or service becomes a quick decision. Strong brands stay top-of-mind and help us to be efficient. During these more challenging economic times, strong brands become even more valuable. Resources are tighter. Desired results are mandatory.

A brand is much more than just a logo or a clever tagline. It's the outward expression of the unique and rel-

[tips]

1 | Your message must be simple, so that

prospects and customers can internalize it. They must embrace it and want it.

2 | A core purpose should be more than just the sheer pursuit of profits. Successful enterprises set their sights on seemingly unattainable objectives, and stay true to their core values as they pursue a bold vision.

3 | Use your brand strategy to guide your growth, whether it comes from internal product development or outside acquisitions.

evant value that you provide. It's how you satisfy your customers' needs, day in and day out. Your message must be simple, so that your prospects and customers can internalize it. They must embrace it, and want it.

Your brand should also serve as the guiding framework for your business. Resource allocation decisions, internal policy formulation, organizational cul-

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Building your brand, from discovery through diligence

IT'S CRITICAL TO KEEP in mind what your company stands for in the minds of your customers, employees and other stakeholders. This is your brand, and every action you take should be consistent with it, and make it stronger.

You may think that branding is a large company concept — an invest-

ment that you simply can't afford. Wrong — it's an investment that you simply can't ignore. The marketplace in which you do business is complex. Your customers have lots of choices for the services and products they use. Just like you, they are apt to be overwhelmed by e-mails, junk mail, media ads and phone solicitations. We all seek

tural refinements and new product development strategies should all be developed with your brand in mind. The relationships that you build, the way in which you go about your daily business and the internal culture that you create for your employees all shape your brand. Oftentimes, it's the perception of who you are and what you represent that makes customers want to associate with you, and do more business with you over time.

So let's assume you agree that creating a strong brand is critical. How do you go about accomplishing it? We recommend a four-stage "block and tackling" process that involves hard work and a commitment to stick with it. Much like an annual plan, a brand must be nurtured and continually refined to keep it fresh and relevant. Here's an outline of the four stages:

First, discovery

Think about what your business is really about. Define your company's core competencies, unique assets, driving goals and potential Achilles' heels. Analyze the marketplace to discover emerging and existing needs that are not being addressed. Understand how your products or services can best address these needs in a differentiated and unique way. Be honest in looking at yourself, the market and your competitors. Understand your competition's strengths and how are they likely to respond to your actions and emerging trends.

Second, distillation

Formulate your strategy. Begin by articulating your core purpose and values. A core purpose should be more than just the sheer pursuit of profits. Successful enterprises set their sights on seemingly unattainable objectives, and stay true to their core values as they pursue a bold vision.

Next, develop a concise positioning strategy. This should highlight a bull's-eye target, a competitive frame-of-reference, the unique benefits that you offer and support reasons why. Your strategy should also include a clear definition and prioritization of the

results you hope to achieve. Finally, distill a creative expression for your brand — design your identity elements and craft your messages to ensure that your promise is communicated with maximum clarity and optimal impact.

Third, delivery

Go to market. Develop and execute a marketing plan to build brand awareness, motivate initial and repeat purchase and build customer loyalty over time. Choose your communication vehicles carefully, recognizing that oftentimes the medium is the message. Think about how to optimally leverage advertising, promotion, PR and collat-

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customers and prospects feel about your products and services. Conduct market audits and solicit customer feedback.

Facilitate open and honest dialogue up, down and across your organization. Don't allow silos to form — keep

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— Steve Carples, Synergistics Consulting

eral to project the right image.

Use your brand strategy to guide your growth, whether it comes from internal product development or outside acquisitions. Design your sales and customer care protocols to reflect your brand, and make sure that your internal organizational culture is consistent with the core purpose and values you have articulated.

Finally, diligence

Be a brand steward — measure and refine. Stewardship is about "keeping the course" and ensuring that all your actions stay true to your brand strategy. Don't chase an opportunity just because it presents itself. Stay focused on your vision, values and positioning strategy. Define metrics to measure your progress, and to assess how your

everyone focused on the same objectives. And use the feedback to continuously improve your offering and brand expression.

Of course, this four-stage process is only a roadmap. Success comes from execution, execution, execution. Begin with a clear vision. F.R.E.E. yourself from the constraints of current thinking: Forget the boundaries, the how-we-got-here's and the way-we've-always-done-it's. Recreate the marketplace structure based on your historical strengths and core competencies. Envision new ways that you can meet customer wants — see the future through their eyes. Engage your target audiences in this new vision, both intellectually and emotionally. Through this process, you will create a unique and relevant brand platform.