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On Brand

So many people mean so many different things by the term “brand” that it pays to clarify your definition at the start of the discussion – for the sake of clarity.

For my purposes as a communications strategist, “brand” is what’s known about you on the basis of your name alone. It’s an effective definition in that it boasts simplicity and allows for a host of considerations that make the subject of branding actually quite broad.

At its heart, brand is a sociological consideration. It lives in the feelings of everyone who comes into contact with your product, service or organization. It is the shared experience of all of those people, individually and in groups.

Marketing and branding are closely related but not the same thing. Marketing is about external buy-in only. Brand includes internal considerations. Think of it this way: marketing will inform the purchasing public as to what you are selling, how much it costs and why it is a better deal than competing products in the marketplace. Branding includes every business factor that came into getting your product to the shelf, and the contexts through which it is being sold.

News stories, for instance, about abusive manufacturing circumstances have had negative impact on such world brands as Apple and Nike. Starbucks makes its standards for coffee purchasing a key part of its corporate messaging because its customers care about the ethics of their sourcing.

But creating a brand starts with much more basic considerations. The core of every successful brand is a simply expressed promise that addresses a basic human truth. Coke, for instance, understands that they can sell a lot of product on the promise of happiness. Its a good promise, partly because literally everyone in the world can relate to it, and more importantly because its a promise that they can deliver on. For people who like Coke, Coke creates happiness.

The first question in the development of a brand strategy is therefore “what does the thing you are selling actually mean to the people you would like to have buy it?”

Figuring that out means understanding yourself as much as it means understanding your audience. The insight that drives brand communications is often as important as product quality. Building on that insight, the challenge is to keep the message fresh and relevant while also maintaining the qualities that make you who you are.

Remember that other people’s opportunity to have an opinion about you is not limited to direct experience. At a certain point, what people say to each other about you will outweigh whatever you may have to say about yourself – and those people constantly measure your performance against your promise.

Brand-consciousness helps companies to stay on target – over time and regardless of scope.