

Getting the Most From Your Brand Team

By Mark Zust, Nead Brand Partners

Developing a strong, memorable brand takes a significant investment of time, human resources, and specialized expertise. Done well, a strategic brand initiative will focus and communicate your value proposition to clients and prospects, strengthen staff and stakeholder loyalty, and ultimately, make you the preferred brand in your category. Remember: It's not necessary to have the resources of Nike or Merrill Lynch to dominate your market.

What you *do* need is a dedicated brand team comprised of executives, key stakeholders and a strategic brand consulting firm. It goes without saying that if upper management, including the president, CEO, CFO, and senior marketing counsel, are not committed to creating and sustaining a brand position that the company can own and develop, then the entire brand building process is doomed to failure. Nothing is more fragile than a fledgling brand. It will require a tremendous belief, communicated from the top down, that your company offers services and a guaranteed client experience that the competition simply can't duplicate. If you honestly believe your company is a "me too" and "competent, but nothing special", then do yourself a favor and don't travel down the rigorous path necessary to build your brand. Instead, save your money and invest it in expanding your sales staff, streamlining your operations or beefing up your executive team.

However, if you believe your brand is worth developing, that it can grow in stature and equity given the proper commitment, then it's time to get busy. Consider the following critical realities if you expect to get your money's worth from your brand development team. Used properly, your team can transform your company into a highly valued, premium brand:

Value the little things.

As the old saying goes: "The big things may get you a new client, but it's the little things that keep them". Give your

brand consultants full access to talk with employees, observe daily procedures and prepare an honest, unvarnished report on their observations of what you do well internally, and what you don't.

Develop realistic short-term goals.

Premium brands aren't built overnight. Nor do they happen without management's commitment to improve service at every level of the organization. Enacting major changes in a company's culture can take many months, even years, spurred on by visible, incremental change. Work with your brand team to create a timeline for achieving small, measurable victories, particularly in the first six months of the brand initiative. Such victories might include reducing or eliminating an outmoded procedure, form or committee. Consider tying these victories to an employee recognition event or other incentive, and use this as an opportunity to explain how the change reflects the company's core brand values.

Listen to your customers and the marketplace.

Do your homework, preferably with the help of research professionals. An impartial, skilled facilitator will get to the heart of your employees' fears and desires in ways an executive-led staff meeting never could. Also, phone interviews with clients and prospects can reveal the *real* reasons people value your firm and what continues to earn their business. In addition, put your team to work on discovering what the competition is doing and how they're

GROW WISELY.

3635 Perkins Avenue, Suite 6a
Cleveland, Ohio 44114

p 216 431-9301
f 216 431-9331

www.neadbrandpartners.com



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viewed in the marketplace. Mining for this information takes time and skill, but the insights are worth their weight in gold.

Get good analyses.

Be sure to review all collected data yourself to provide specific insights, but then trust your team to supply objective analysis that is untarnished by internal politics. This means allowing your brand advisors to present findings that may not always be positive or complementary, but are critical to understanding your current standing in the marketplace. As the saying goes: “Your brand isn’t what you say it is, it’s what the market says it is after you’ve left the room.” Be prepared to recognize your blind spots and allow your brand advisors to hold up a mirror to your organization, even if the view isn’t always pretty.

Expect accountability.

Look to establish goals that are measurable and practical for yourself, your internal brand team, and your strategic brand advisors. A monthly report from each team member, along with next steps, will keep everyone honest and ensure that if there is a barrier to collecting information or getting approvals, that it is addressed and resolved promptly.

Let your brand consultants in.

Too often, consultants are brought in as hired guns, often after a company is embroiled in a PR nightmare or after the internal marketing team has already formed an intractable opinion about what the company’s brand is or should be. Instead, be prepared to start from scratch, to challenge all preconceptions, and allow your advisors to ask tough questions. A lot of important data will be collected by having your consultants sit in on board meetings, planning meetings, financial sessions, weekly staff meetings, and anywhere else that offers insight into how your organization communicates and prepares for future growth. To close any of these doors to your brand advisors is to relegate them to the role of vendor and severely limit their ability to intimately understand your company and position your brand.

Consider your brand an ongoing investment.

Don’t look at your brand development initiatives as a one-time expense, any more than you would your legal or financial counsel. Create an initial budget for information gathering, research and positioning. Then, budget annually for maintaining and growing your brand, through ongoing consultation, marketing, public relations and employee training. Successful brands are the ones who are constantly improving and delivering on their brand promise to customers.

Become a brand ambassador. As the brand team develops powerful messaging, a memorable logo, compelling sales materials and much more, it’s critical that everyone on staff embrace and promote the brand. Live your brand and set the example by becoming a self-proclaimed “brand ambassador”. Think Steve Jobs at Apple Computer, or Lee Iacocca at Chrysler Corporation. Visible, passionate executives are one of the keys to building believable brands.

Get comfortable with chaos.

To many executives, the brand development process appears messy and chaotic at times. When it comes to distilling a company’s brand essence, it’s not unusual for the team to go down some blind alleys before reaching clarity. The process of discovering the intangibles that motivate your people and markets is deceptively simple. Not easy, but simple. Be assured that, given the necessary time and support, your brand team will uncover your core brand attributes and can translate it into words, images and actions that are irresistible to your market. To get a finished brand platform with lasting value, be prepared to accept that the journey may take a few twists along the way.

Always look for ways to improve.

A brand is a living, changing thing. Once the brand platform, messaging and materials are in place, the real work begins. Constantly ask for feedback from your team, from clients and prospects. Model and strengthen what works, eliminate what doesn’t. By maintaining a fresh outlook on your brand and being willing to adapt to changing market conditions, your brand will always be relevant and valuable.