

TOM

The Brand Identity Delusion

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“Somewhere around the fifth or seventh grade I figured out that I could ingratiate myself to people by making them laugh. Essentially, I was just trying to make them like me. But after a while it became part of my identity.” — Tina Fey

Have you ever heard, or been asked, this question? *“If your organization, or brand, were a car, what make or model would it be and why?”* No? You’re lucky. I’ve heard it a lot. In fact, too many times to count, and not once have I come across the perspective inherent in this response: *“My brand would be a customizable, decked out limousine. One in which I can give my customers the rides of their lives!”*

Most organizations are obsessed with navel gazing; trying to discover “who *they* are” and “what makes *them* special.” They hire consultants and spend countless hours pondering *their* unique identities. And for what reason? To help them create *their* brand personalities and craft *their* messages, of course. There’s only one little problem with *their* approach: it’s completely backwards.

Business is not psychotherapy; it’s theatre. It’s not about going “in,” because your audience is interested in you and your unearthed identity. They’re not. It’s about going “out,” and ingratiating yourself to your audience by making them feel good about *themselves*, and their decisions, in your presence. It’s about unearthing what *they* need to feel good, smart and special, and then giving it to them.

It’s easy to become hypnotized and confused by your own marketplace experiences. That’s what great brands are hoping to have happen. They want you to get lost in their carefully constructed brand identities and come to believe that it’s all about *their* uniqueness and passion for *their* coffee, equipment, motorcycle, phone, etc. In fact, it’s really all about you.

Like great directors and producers, great organizations are, first and foremost, passionate about their brand performance (and pulling you into it). Before you even know it, you’re rationalizing the purchase of a \$4 cup of coffee, a \$3 golf ball, a \$30,000 Screamin' Eagle Fat Boy, or a \$500 phone. Why? Because you’re a Starbucks kind of girl. You’re a champion like Tiger. You’re a *rebel* accountant. You think different, dammit. That’s why!

The present, bemused way of thinking is, “*a brand is a promise and engagement is the Holy Grail. So, all we have to do is engage people with our communication and deliver on our brand promise.*” Really? What precisely is Starbucks’ brand promise? How about Nike’s or Harley’s? Surely you must know Apple’s brand promise? And do you really believe that GEICO’s brand is all about promising to save you 15% on your car insurance? Yes? Then you’ve been hypnotized, my friend.

Leadership brands don’t make promises. They create and fulfill expectations through carefully and precisely crafted associations; expectations of receiving a particular feeling about one’s identity. Starbucks wants you to feel special as you exchange pleasantries with their Barista, and urbane as you hurry down the sidewalk flaunting your overflowing shoulder bag and upscale logoed cup. And they’ve done one hell of a job at it (\$9 billion projected revenue in 2007).

Nike wants you to feel like a winner, as you proudly tee up your \$4 swoosh-embossed golf ball, despite the fact that you’ll inevitably smash it into the woods where it will land humbly amongst the \$1 Spaldings and Wilsons. Harley wants you to feel like a member of an exclusive, free bird club, as you hang up your pinstripe suit and don a \$40 t-shirt, \$300 pair of boots and \$400 black leather Harley jacket. And Apple? Well, let’s just say that Steve Jobs totally gets branding and the spirit of our times.

Please don’t get me wrong: I am not saying that it’s all about image and that product and service attributes are irrelevant. In fact, it’s just the opposite. From selecting organic eggs for my children, which tells me that I’m a caring Dad, to driving a Toyota Prius, which tells me that I’m a progressive one, today the substance of a brand is as important, if not more so, than the sizzle in creating resonant associations and the subsequent brand “feeling.”

What I *am* saying is that your products, services, pricing, place of business, promotion, and people are all a means to an end. And that end is the outward-focused, enhanced identity of your audience. So forget about trying to figure out whether you’re a Buick or a Bugatti. It really doesn’t matter. Instead, get busy ingratiating yourself to your audience by helping them feel good about themselves and their decisions. After a while, that unique and valuable way of being will become your brand identity.

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