

TOM

A Brand is Not a Separate Thing

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“If I am I because you are you. And you are you because I am I. Then I am not I and you are not you.”

— *Unknown Rabbi*

It may sound like double-talk, but the wise Rabbi’s message is a profoundly important one for those trying to navigate today’s complex and rapidly evolving marketplace. And it’s this: We are not separate. We define each other. We are fronts and backs of each other—producer/consumers; government/citizens; manufacturer/suppliers; consultant/clients; management/talent; and, especially, brand/customers. In fact, a brand only knows what it is *in terms* of its customers. Unfortunately, we tell ourselves a very different story.

We have this notion that a brand is a separate thing built through a series of distinct, disconnected activities— marketing to attract customers; product and service delivery to gain revenues; HR to keep the work force in line and under control; customer service to deal with problems; finance to keep score and fuel the process; etc. The truth, like most truths, is poles apart and hidden in plain sight: Everything and everyone in the *marketstream* is connected.

In order to describe a particular brand—what it is—you must describe its behavior—what it does. And to describe what it does, you must describe it—and all activities associated with it— *in relationship* to its customers and its customers’ behavior. What the brand is and how it evolves is what the customers are and how they evolve. A brand, therefore, is one, interdependent system of behavior. It is *not* a separate thing.

It’s conceptually very simple

Think of it this way: If you lean a bunch of sticks against each other, they stand up because they support each other. Take one away and the others become less stable, or they fall. Easy to understand, but, like the childhood game “pick-up sticks,” extremely complex and challenging to tease apart. The hard work of value co-creation— viscerally understanding the relationships amongst and between the sticks and strategically propping them up and connecting them to each other—is today’s key to sustained marketplace success.

Take the struggling business of broadcast radio. If you think about it, there is really no such thing as the “radio business.” There’s the marketing/advertising/media/content/platform/talent/listener/community” business. But most radio business owners are blind to this holistic view—that *today’s* radio brand involves what *today’s* customers are, especially how they derive value through their association with the brand. And so they’ve been late in employing new ideas and technologies to co-create value with their customers.

They didn’t see that brand marketers and content producers were looking for *compelling* value in the connection to the radio brand’s audience, as well as the audience’s affinity to the radio brand; listeners wanted *compelling* value in the audio interface, the content, the brand association, and the marketers’ advertising; talent desired *compelling* value in the brand association, as well as their relationship with management; and the community wanted *compelling* value in identifying with the radio brand, as well as in the brand-enabled connections and activities.

Think very different

In contrast, take a measured look at Apple; a former niche computer manufacturer with a market capitalization that’s now larger than IBM and Intel, and which is over *one-third* the value of the entire broadcast radio industry. Apple didn’t reinvent the “music business,” but they did prop up industry players and customers by co-creating compelling value with iPod + iTunes. And Apple didn’t reinvent the “cellular phone business,” but they did architect compelling value with their assorted customers with the iPhone and App Store.

So stop, think, and consider carefully whether your daily activities—your investment of scarce resources—are propping up and supporting real and potential customers, or adding even more noise and confusion to their busy lives. Are you strategically creating value for the marketplace ecosystem, or are you broadcasting messages and defending the status quo. Get your head out of the past and into the present.

The key to a successful brand—a successful relationship—lies out there, in the hopes, dreams and real lives of *all* of your customers. Because a brand, you see, is not a separate, promotable thing. A brand is not a series of problems to be managed and solved. It’s a co-created reality to be experienced and enhanced with others. The important question to ask is: Who will co-create that reality?

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