

TOM

Brand is Not a Four-Letter Word

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“To use the same words is not a sufficient guarantee of understanding; one must use the same words for the same genus of inward experience; ultimately one must have one’s experiences in common.”

—*Nietzsche*

A few weeks ago, I had lunch with a friend prior to an evening speech. After some small talk about life, the universe and everything, our conversation naturally turned to the abysmal U.S. economy. “Things are really tough right now,” she explained. “I’ve tried to get everyone to understand the importance of branding in this very difficult environment, but I don’t think they get it. In fact,” she added. “Our customers hate that word.” “What word?” I asked. “Brand?” “Yea. The non-profits we work with have a real aversion to the whole notion of branding. I guess they don’t really understand the concept and how it applies to them.”

They’re not the only ones. I recently wrote a guest post for a Spanish blog (www.grasp.es), and I was shocked when one commenter compared branding to the notorious Nazi Joseph Goebbels’ propaganda principles. Talk about profane. These sentiments about branding continue to baffle me. Individuals, schools, nonprofit groups, and small businesses tend to fall into a camp that believes that either branding is evil, or that it’s too commercial, too expensive, or otherwise not applicable to them.

Those feelings may have been appropriate in the heydays of mass marketing, when “branding” was synonymous with image, spin, and mega spending on advertising. But that dog doesn’t hunt any longer. Today’s message saturated, multimedia and culturally astute and fragmented society has changed the very concept of the word “brand.” It’s no longer a four-letter word, which conjures up ideas of manipulation and in your face corporate propaganda. To the contrary, it’s an essential marketplace construct.

Today the word “brand” is shorthand for why you—or anything or anyone else—matters in a world inundated with similar products, similar services and a plethora of worthy causes all clamoring for our attention. It’s an abbreviated reference for the gut feeling or expectation people have about something, some group, or someone that helps them make meaning and save time. It’s a kind of Platonic ideal, which stands for the essence of a business, school, organization, product, service, or even locale.

A brand is really nothing more than a metaphor, which began as a symbolic representation of creation and/or ownership, and has evolved to encompass traits like consistency, style and price, as well as more meaningful attributes like purpose, conscience and heritage. If you add up the tangible and intangible qualities of something—the gestalt—and wish to represent the meaning, value and distinctive character this greater whole conveys to its defined audience, today you refer to that something as “brand;” e.g. iPhone, Twitter, PBS, ASPCA, TED, the Yankees, Zappos, Princeton, etc.

No matter what your passion is as an individual or an organization, you must make it come to life for the benefit of your customers and employees. That’s *branding*. It’s the act of doing meaningful things that help illuminate and enliven your brand’s significance and value. It’s about developing *and* stimulating the choice of new products, services and experiences that bring excitement, joy and comfort to people’s lives. The resulting “brand” is the sum of what you do for the world, as well as how you uniquely go about doing it.

Branding is *not* about generating awareness to the masses (sorry strange balloon guy). It’s a framework for thinking about your reason for being. It’s a way of continuously sensing people’s desires and rapidly delivering compelling value to satisfy those desires. It’s about being constantly on the lookout for ways to connect with people and “go deep” into your relationship with them, and their relationship with you and each other. It’s about new processes, new business models, new ways of thinking, and new ways of interacting.

I’m well aware that words can, and frequently do, conjure up very strong emotions in people. But “brand” shouldn’t be one of them. The challenge for anyone in a leadership position in today’s torpid marketplace is to get over the aversion to the word, fully understand the concept, and make sure that their entire organization embraces and conveys the essence of their “brand”—who they are, why they do what they do, how they uniquely go about it, and why it matters to *their* audience—in every single word and action.

Like it or not, you cannot simply broadcast messages, stage stunts, cross your fingers, and expect your business or mission to thrive. It won’t. Not today. So throw away the old branding textbooks. Forget about trying to engineer your brand through creative messaging and associations. Instead, stay tuned in and connected to the living, breathing marketplace of your audience’s fears, challenges, and aspirations. Brand isn’t a four-letter word. It is not a noun to be promoted, nor one to be vilified. It’s a verb to be lived with integrity, imagination and passion.

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For the past twenty years Tom Asacker has helped companies such as P&G, UPS, HP, GE, as well as dozens of small-to-medium sized business and start-ups improve their strategies and inspire their people. He’s the author of critically acclaimed books including *A Clear Eye for Branding* and *Sandbox Wisdom*, and his latest, *A Little Less Conversation*. Visit www.acleareye.com to learn more.