



Three levels of brand development

By J. Spell

The answer to the question, what is a brand, depends on who you ask. It's true, there's more than one right answer. That's because the benefit a brand can provide is directly related to its application by different users.

In other words, experience, understanding and even providence can change its significance to a business leader over time. A brand takes time to develop. So does the meaning and value of what a brand is and can do.

Let's explore this process by simplifying the many degrees of brand integration within business today into three distinct levels of brand development for simplicity and clarity.



LEVEL 1: Brand as identification

Many leaders begin by defining a brand as basic visual identification. A name, logo and color scheme. Applied to business cards, signs, vehicles, uniforms and sales literature, it helps separate one company from another.

At this level, their marketing and sales message often centers around specific features, capabilities and performance measurements in an attempt to emphasize their strengths to create a temporary competitive advantage. Temporary because their competitors are engaged in the same process, always trying to stay one step ahead.

The results can go either way depending on who has the upper hand at the moment. But even if industry leadership isn't always maintained, consistent use of brand identification, a competitive sales message and reasonable performance can in time produce a positive expectation in the minds of the company's prospects and customers.

Depending on competitor aggressiveness, company growth objectives and good fortune, some companies never develop their brand beyond basic visual identification.



LEVEL 2: Brand as benefit

When, in the course of business, a perceptive leader recognizes that his/her company's individual strengths and capabilities can be integrated into a broader customer benefit significantly unique to his/her company, the brand advances to the second level.

Typically adopted first by sales and marketing personnel aggressively seeking a significant competitive advantage, their once unfocused and inconsistent messages are now coordinated. So instead of confusion, they are establishing and reinforcing this deliverable benefit using specific features and performance measurements as evidence of expected satisfaction.

Several years ago, Dell computers used the unifying brand promise, "Easy as Dell", to integrate a broad range of product and service advantages into a single statement of benefit. This approach allowed them to feature everything from their bundled productivity tools and 24/7 customer service to their custom-built hardware configurations and even durability.

It made Dell not just another seller of high-tech systems, but "the" source for easy solutions. Plus, it established a strong emotional appeal that, combined with the logical presentation of product features, produced high levels of brand preference and purchase intent.

The result set the bar higher for competitors. Instead of just trying to meet or beat specific product or service features, it forced them to deliver a better value-added total experience. But there's still one more level to go.

LEVEL 3: Brand as lifestyle

The highest level of brand development is realized when the unique brand promise synthesized from a company's whole package of strengths and capabilities, becomes fully embraced and championed by the entire organization.

Everyone from the top of the company to the bottom sees themselves as performing their role in support of the brand. Leadership purposefully makes strategic decisions that build the value and influence of the brand. Departments and managers are encouraged and empowered to create powerful brand synergy within the organization and its processes. Passionate brand performance is brought to life within company personnel. Brand communications capture the heart and mind of both internal and external audiences.

At this level the brand is far more than mere visual identification or even a uniquely deliverable benefit. It is a lifestyle. A culture. An internally and externally recognizable and sustainable personality. It is the company.



A classic example of this level of brand development is Harley-Davidson whose “pursuit of freedom” brand character has developed a deep personal and emotional appeal with a broad audience, from the renegade gang member on one extreme to the elite doctor or lawyer at the other.

Their unique brand promise has helped the company maintain a substantial price premium. A long backlog of orders. Healthy additional sales from accessories, clothing and events. And perhaps best of all, a low cost of sales because of an ever-growing population of lifelong repeat customers.

But whether or not your product or service has the glitz of broad consumer appeal, it can be much more than symbolic visual identification. Used effectively it can provide a unifying focus that represents a significant competitive advantage. Fully adopted and developed, it can be a driving force that guides your organization’s growth and solidifies lasting relationships with customers.

Perhaps the most important question isn’t “What is a brand?” Maybe it’s “What can your brand become?”

To take your brand to the next level of value, call us today at 903-534-5220.