

A Cheat Sheet to a Sustainable Brand

By Will Burke

PART ONE: Do Your Homework

There is nothing appealing about homework. Since childhood when homework became a daily requirement, we tried to avoid it or get it over with as quickly as possible so we could get on to more exciting things. In today's business world this trait of human nature continues to play a part.

Often in the mad dash to find the solution to a nagging problem, we end up with a quick fix that only delays the inevitable due diligence that's required to advance. Building a sustainable brand is no different. We have to do our homework in order to get it right.

Let's apply this thinking to the brands we experience daily. Some brands seem to reinvent themselves every year or so, constantly striving to be at the forefront of the "next big thing." While others seem to have not aged a day and are just as relevant as the first time they came into our lives. Why is that?

For some lifestyle brands, continual reinvention is part of the brand DNA. "Trendy", "fashionable" or similar guiding principles are a core part of their brand values. Beverage and clothing brands are good examples of this approach. These brands are appealing to a target audience that is evolving themselves, so the strategy while unconventional, is expected and it can be successful. With the exception of this example, an approach like this is risky and can leave consumers unsure of your brand's identity.

So how do you get out of this cycle, or better yet, avoid getting into it in the first place? You have to be willing to take a deeper look at your business and how your brand supports it. In short, you have to do your homework.

Countless clients have come to us asking us to redesign their brand or their packaging or change some other primary brand component in the hope that this time they'll get it right. I've listened to many prospective clients tell me some variation of, "My last agency did not get us (or our products, or customers)." Or my favorite, "Our customer's tastes have changed." Really? Trust me, unless you're willing to do the homework it takes to fully understand the issues your brand is facing, the results won't be any different.

To build a successful and sustainable brand, your homework starts by defining some basics about your business.

What do you do?

Who is your audience?

Why is it compelling to them?

We've met many business owners over the years and when asked these questions the majority responds, "I don't know." The sad truth is if you don't know why you are in business, no amount of investment in branding can sustain you over the long term.

Not understanding your brand is why homework is such an important part of the equation. By answering the next few questions you will be on the way to correctly positioning your brand. You will gain a better understanding of your audience, what's really important to them and how to interact with them. And finally, you will have the beginnings of a strategy that can help you grow and sustain your brand over the long term. So let's get started.

1. What is your business?

By knowing what you do, you also know what you don't do. Defining a clear focus will position you to appeal to more people. It may seem counterintuitive that a narrower focus would broaden your audience, but no one trusts the restaurant that serves Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisine. We all know you can't be that good at everything.

Knowing exactly what you want to focus on today will give you the clarity you need when considering change or expansion in the future. Has the category shifted? Do you see a new unmet customer need? And speaking of your customer, when you define what business you are in you also reinforce the reasons why customers buy from you in the first place.

2. Who is your audience?

Being very clear and focused about your audience is also critical to your business. The narrower your focus, the easier it is to have a meaningful conversation with them. And, I do mean a conversation. If you are delivering a monologue to your customers you are way behind the times.

Understanding your customer is crucial and this means going deeper than conventional targeting (age, income, education level). The demographics of your target audience may be women 30-40 years of age living and working in a metropolitan area. And yet the experiences and needs of a 32-year-old single woman who rides the subway to work are very different than a married 36-year-old mother of two who drives to work.

Take the time to learn about their daily lives, what motivates them, and what situations they face. Do they listen to popular music? What kind of music - country or rock? How do they listen - at home or on the go? What do they read and why? What is their favorite part of the magazine - the articles or the horoscope? Find the commonalities and you will find your true target audience.

3. Why are you compelling?

It should be clear to you and easy to explain why you are compelling to your customer. How exactly is your product different from the competition? It is different isn't it? You can't just have more of the same. To stand apart in a saturated market you need to solve a problem and fit the consumer's lifestyle. Does your product give them a compelling new experience, a different choice or is it lost in the crowd? By carefully considering your audience and what aspect of their lifestyle your brand enhances, you can position yourself as the only solution. Now, that's compelling.

So, are you done with your homework? Not quite. You've completed the business strategy chapter. If you do nothing else, this exercise alone provides some clear context and direction for your business activities. The next step is to examine your brand strategy. The clarity of your brand platform is directly related to how successful your

brand communications are in creating the desired perception in your audience's mind. In my next newsletter, I'll cover five questions to define your brand. Until then continue to apply the lessons learned in this part of your homework.

- Will Burke, CEO and Creative Director