

PART TWO: Align Your Brand Strategy with Your Business Strategy

By Will Burke

Think about your favorite food. How does it look, smell and taste? What attracts you to it? Recalling those sensory feelings is probably rather easy to do. We know from human psychology that the senses drive our first impressions about people, places and objects. Our senses also trigger our memories and automatically, unconsciously and without effort recreate those experiences in our mind.

Likewise, a strong brand, properly and consistently executed - the brand experience - activates the senses and creates positive responses from your audiences. In order to design the right brand experience, you first need to start with the right brand strategy or as we call it, the brand platform.

In my last newsletter I discussed business strategy and provided specific homework exercises for establishing a clear context and direction for your business activities. Your homework addressed three critical business questions: What do you do? Who is your audience? Why is it compelling to them? Your answers are the foundation for building a sustainable brand. The stronger your foundation, the more sustainable your brand.

With your business strategy in place, your next assignment is to translate it into a brand platform. And why is that important? Simply, your audiences experience your brand, not your business. By starting with a solid brand platform that describes what the brand stands for, its personality and key points of differentiation, you define the brand experience for your audiences. When that definition is consistently executed in your brand communications, whether written, verbal or visual, these brand experiences will form a perception of your brand with your audiences. Over time that perception becomes your reputation, and finally your promise. What promise are you making to your audiences?

It's now time to pick up your pencils and answer the following brand strategy questions:

1. What are your brand values?
2. What is your desired brand personality?
3. How is your brand positioned?

1. What are your brand values?

Brand values drive behavior and decision-making, and ideally are shared with your audiences. However, your values are not defined by your audiences. They are defined by what you truly believe in. Remember, you have to live and communicate them everyday. Your brand values can be as fun or serious as you want them to be; more important is that they must be authentic.

Every business decision related to your brand should align with its values. Think about yourself and your own life. Consider how your values influence your decisions, where you live, your food choices, even what light bulbs you use. Now back to your brand. Is your brand expressing the values you want attached to it? Do these values cultivate the brand experience you want established? It has been our experience that brands that

have clearly defined values and consistently communicate them have a greater chance of forming meaningful connections with their audiences.

For example, most consumers when considering outerwear may at first just be interested in style and functionality. But Patagonia brings to the conversation something different and it resonates with their customers. Patagonia's mission statement to "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis" clearly reflects their values and becomes a point of preference and pride for their customers.

2. What is your desired brand personality?

Brand personality is about attributing words that describe human emotions and characteristics to a brand to achieve relevance. Is your brand warm, imaginative, fun and quirky? Or is it serious, cosmopolitan, refined and educated? A distinctive brand personality consistently executed will easily differentiate your brand from another and engender brand loyalty. Consider the brands you associate with and are loyal to. What are the words that come to mind as you describe your relationship with these brands? You'll find the words you use are brand personality traits.

Just as important as having a brand personality is consistently applying it in every audience touchpoint. Does your customer get the same personality and emotive cues from your package as your Web site? Consider Ben & Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream. Their brand personality is expressed very clearly and consistently in their brand communications and products. Their customers feel connected to the playful, nonconformist, passionate and likeable traits of the brand. And customers are willing to pay quite a bit more to be connected to that fun, yet uncompromising personality. Who else besides Ben and Jerry's could call a flavor "Cherry Garcia"?

3. How is your brand positioned?

Positioning is the distinctive orientation that a brand adopts in its competitive environment to ensure that individuals can tell the brand apart from others. When many companies are saying the same thing, what can you do and say that is legitimate and meaningfully sets you apart?

If you've done your homework on business strategy, you already know why you're compelling to your audiences. Your brand position is about clearly communicating this competitive advantage to your core target audience. If you are positioned properly in your audience's mind there should be no other alternative to your brand.

Take for example Seventh Generation, the makers of safe, environmentally responsible household and personal care products. Seventh Generation gets its name from the Great Law of the Iroquois that states, "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." In support of this values statement, Seventh Generation differentiates themselves from competitors in their category through a position of sincere environmental advocate and educator. This position is delivered upon through their brand communications and the products they sell.

Have you clearly expressed how you lead in your category? When you stand for something larger than what you sell and communicate it effectively, you move beyond mere commodity.

Pencils down. How are you doing? By answering the three questions of values, personality and position you are well on your way towards building the right brand experience for your audience. You are also ready for the final part of your homework. These last two questions are for measuring the success of your brand.

Does your brand strategy express your business strategy?

Does your customer experience the brand as you intended?

The first question is an inward perspective on your business, what you do, who you do it for and how you're compelling. Your brand strategy should clearly align with your business strategy. If you understand your business, creating your brand, its values, personality and position comes natural.

The second question is an outward perspective on your brand. Experience your brand from the viewpoint of your audiences. How is your brand engaging the senses? Are the brand elements and communications creating one cohesive experience that effortlessly reinforces your brand in their mind? If your intent and your execution don't align, review your homework again to identify the misstep. It's often in plain sight.

So who's going to grade your homework? Your customers, of course. After all, they are the final litmus test of the true success of your brand.

- Will Burke, CEO and Creative Director