

Identity Crisis: The Divine Comedy of Brand Management

Economic limbo cannot erase the fact that we live in a world where cars start the first time, phones are addictive and the gourmet coffee, is well, gourmet. Only the Unaware offer products or services they deem good enough to a world where everyone can get anything they want almost anywhere.

Today's consumer is looking for you, the brand steward, to provide them with a self-actualizing experience. And while this needs to be orchestrated carefully, take heart, ending up in branding purgatory doesn't happen overnight. It comes after a lifetime of refusing to be saved. Sadly, for every good thing we can do, there are many more actions we take either purposefully or by happenstance, that simply don't contribute anything worthwhile to the brand's presence, personality and strength.

So what can the faithful do to avoid such a fate? Keep a watchful eye over the Seven Deadly Sins of Brand.

The Sin of Ennui

Ennui is essentially boredom brought about by prosperity: an unwillingness to investigate, evolve and challenge or do much of anything. It has killed many great brands while their executives scatter to new, unsuspecting organizations, secretly scratching their head in wonder that their former co-workers were unable to learn new ways to gain market-share.

It begins something like this, "No one can touch us. We are superior in every way!" Then subtly evolves to something more like this, "We are number one and always will be. Now we are bored. Enough about me, why don't you tell me what you think of me!"

And finally it ends with, "Ugh, why bother?"

The opposite of this sin is a firm belief in one's offering, a willingness to deliver what's promised and strength of conviction.

The Sin of Functional Silo

"That's not my department" echoes in the halls of an organization that has succumbed to this sin. These Sullen Pagans do not understand that functional silos are barriers to innovation, not just in brand marketing.

In *Driving Growth Through Innovation*, Robert Tucker says that one of the reasons innovation has not become embedded as a key driver of growth and profitability in many organizations is because it has been limited by functional and divisional silos within companies. The responsibility for innovation has been limited to R&D or senior level Strategic Planning Pagans who do not feel it necessary to speak to, let alone share ideas with others.

I find it fascinating that functional silos are a bi-product of the Quality Movement. Today, thanks to ISO9000 and the like, quality is everyone's responsibility. This needs to be the goal for innovation and brand stewardship as well.

The Sin of Advertising

Advertising can be summed up in one word: impotence. No amount of advertising is going to have the psychological impact today that it did on previous generations. It doesn't have the same function it used to and yet is still used to suck money out of companies in exchange for the false hope of cultural relevance.

If advertising worked like it used to, two well-known Bankrupt Pagans would still be recovering from the pulled muscle they got when high-fiving their agency partner for successfully copying a competitor's "celebutant" television campaign because they would have raked in cash.

Mervyns and Linens 'N Things long enjoyed high top-of-mind awareness, but apparently never got the memo: awareness no longer creates preference. Preference lives in the human heart, where brand matters most.

The Sin of Brand Extension

Girls Gone Wild Apparel, Humane Society Dog Lovers Wine Club, Diet Cherry Vanilla Dr. Pepper, and my favorite as listed on Brandweek, Hooters Energy Drink. There is a special place in Hell for the avarice, the fraudulent, regardless of whether they are malicious or just confused. Egad!

The Sin of Discounting

This sin belongs to the Short-term Gluttons who are quick to reduce prices in order to make the sales number look good on their watch, so they get their bonus. They already have their eyes on the door, not long-term brand success. The mistakes that kill brands are the mistakes you sometimes never realize you've made. And when you do realize them, sometimes it's too late. Unless you are the low-cost producer, you cannot sustain your brand on price cuts and discounts. In fact, companies frequently cause irreparable damage to their brands by discounting. Consumers will pay more if they feel they receive an added benefit or value with the higher price—even in a recession.

The Sin of Spinelessness

Decision by committee is often an exercise in mediocrity. Not standing up for a single, ownable position is pretty common business practice today. Trying to please everyone will result in creating a brand nobody will hate (vs. a brand people will love).

If you work in a culture where you may get your head chewed off by your management team for not using a traditional laddering model or the appropriate shade of navy blue on your PowerPoint deck, then standing up for a radical new idea isn't likely to be considered an asset. Bad news: unless you want to just put in your time on the mediocrity train, then you may wish to consider your options (while you still have them).

The Sin of Marketing Guru Du-Jour

We all use them and hide behind them. After all, nobody ever lost his or her job for mentioning David Aaker's Brand Personality Scale to help demonstrate the case for change.

And where would we be without the Brand Pyramid?

In Strategic Brand Management, Kevin Lane Keller's pyramid reminds me of Dante's gates of hell-- while I am captivated (and a bit frightened) by the inscription, I know that true understanding of it lies in the netherworld below. And you guessed it, a guru called

Brand architect has tackled Below The Pyramid. It's really a great example of virtuous marketing pagan adding to the buzzword stew.

Bottom line, marketing guru-ism without an actual business objective (where your job is on the line) is really only theory.

I am tired of theory. I want visceral creative, human (connection) communication. And this, thank Goodness, is why you, Dear Reader, hire people like me.