

DREAM AND DANCE
GET DOWN
WALK THE LINE

by R. Kyle Conway

Most of us talk about “branding” in terms of branding something. Often this refers to an event logo or signage.

In the event production and management world the concept of branding is something that bears deeper investigation. Specifically, what happens if our brand is left unsupervised or is misused? Brand neglect can have a profound impact, the magnitude of which can rock your business to the core. Likewise, properly managing your brand can have a lasting positive influence.

As marketers, we’ve all read the data about how many ads we’re hit with in a typical day. According to Consumer Reports Website, “The average American is exposed to 247 commercial messages per day.” But is that a realistic number?

Texas A&M University Digital Library estimated the average American consumer is exposed to more than 850 commercial messages per day. And yet other sources cite research indicating more than 3,000 messages per day. It seems the jury is still out when you try and quantify how many commercial messages the average American experiences per day.

One thing we can agree on is that the brand landscape is crowded. How do we cut through the clutter to get our messages across and at what cost?

Terms like “Brand Promise” often force us into marketing meetings to find out exactly what that term means and how we will keep and deliver on this mystical idea.

We all have seen the surveys, benchmarks and reports that generally lead to a simple conclusion: we want to improve how we communicate all the great things the company has done in serving its customers, supporting its community and being a good corporate citizen. The goal that emerges is to enhance the corporate image and remove any negative perceptions or barriers to sales.

With reports in hand, the typical decision is to enhance, update or refresh our brand depending on who our target audience is. So we rush out and hire a consultant or talk to the corporate communication folks about possible new designs for a logo, a fresh font, a vibrant color scheme...anything. But it’s often

based solely on what we think our audience is looking for.

A painful lesson learned in branding is making the mistake of thinking our brand is what WE think it is. Brands are not logos and not products. If they were, our perception of companies, organizations and special events would change hourly.

Brand managers for corporations, small businesses or special events are all called upon to handle certain responsibilities for the sake of the brand, such as:

- Monitor and measure brand strength
- Develop a brand plan
- Increase brand awareness, value, accessibility and connectedness (sometimes called “emotional connection”)
- Monitor and measure plan progress
- Develop organizational understanding and support
- Advance ideas that support the brand promise
- Institute mechanisms for messaging – elevator speech, talking points.

Brand managers must use all communications options available, from video to Internet, print to direct mail, special event sponsorship to social media. It all matters and successful brands devote the resources needed to ensure that success. Does yours?

In reality, our brand is simply what others think and feel about us. Are we safe, fun or educational? Are we cutting edge, easy to work with or trustworthy? Entertaining or a good value? All these qualities and more, factor in to the decision to buy from us or associate with us regardless of what we are selling and thus, become our brand.

In fact, all that really exists in the world of brand management is the perception of the customer. The perception is the reality; objectivity is an illusion.

The challenge then becomes how to be good stewards of not just a brand but the perception of a brand. We’ve all seen the daily reminders of what happens when a brand spins off course:

- When a major airline declares bankruptcy, what does that do to our trust in them?
- What about a sports celebrity who is caught in *flagrante delicto*?
- What happens when prices go up without giving customers the added value to justify these increases?

Maddeningly, we all are remembered for what happens in our lowest times. Once our brand has been tarnished we rarely get a second chance to “reposition” ourselves. This concept appears to have no limits.

Consider these familiar brand collapses (without naming names):

- The winningest coach in history
- The most trusted over the counter pain medicine
- The largest retail bank in the country
- A pillar of higher education for more than 250 years
- A top special event in the market for the last two decades.

Aristotle is cited as the source of the proverb “Nature abhors a vacuum.” This means any absences will be filled. As humans we are often too busy to purposefully allocate time and energy dwelling on the fact our perception of brand identity may have been changed without permission. But would you make time knowing that someone or something is waiting in the wings? A replacement for the newly banished brand is always ready and willing to fill that vacant spot.

The next time you head to the marketing meeting, keep this question in mind: How well is your company positioned for successful brand management? Logos, positioning and promises are important. But neglect your brand at your own peril.

As the caretakers of our brands it is up to us to properly nurture and protect them. Do so and you can sustain brand equity for the long term. The strength of your brand depends on it.

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