

Top signs your brand strategy is losing focus

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As a company's marketing strategies adapt to changes in the marketplace, there's always the possibility that its established brand will suffer. By its very nature, a brand must balance legacy -- what it stands for today and what it's stood for in the past -- with vitality -- how it can be revived and refreshed as new conditions demand.

Under such circumstances, it's not hard to lose focus on a brand's core identity.

How can you tell when this is happening and what can be done to remedy the situation? Here are warning signs:

1. Management and employees forget why a particular brand and message are important. With a well-established brand, it's not uncommon for both management and employees to forget why branding is so crucial to success. An effort should be made to remind -- and, when necessary, re-educate -- people about the key objectives associated with branding, such as:

- Communicating your company's values and vision, a useful tool for attracting new customers and talented new hires
- Providing employees with a forceful vision to motivate them in their work
- Enabling industry influencers to promote your message with their followers
- Commanding greater fees for product and services

When your brand message becomes unclear, potential customers have a difficult time grasping your unique value proposition, and why they should

buy from you. It also means “ influencers to prospects,” notes branding specialist Teresa Slider. “ And if your brand seems outdated or unclear to those outside your firm, it will also be perceived that way by your own staff and potential job candidates.”

2. Attempts to boost sales by diversifying results in muddled brand messaging. It’s understandable, particularly in times of slow growth, to add to your company’s product line and jump-start fresh sales. The danger here lies in offering upgrades or innovations bearing little connection to what your established brand stands for.

The result, in many cases, is a confused customer base and a dilution of the brand’s key message points. “ The race to become a generalist, in the hope that it will , never ends well,” writes branding strategist Mark Di Somma. The solution? He urges businesses to think “ in terms of market adjacency, rather than market diversity.”

3. You’ve flooded the market with inconsistent messaging. Because there are so many venues and platforms to address with their brand, companies sometimes attempt to refine or alter the core message, in the belief that tinkering with it may appeal to divergent audiences. In fact, a lack of consistent messaging only serves to weaken the brand’s overall appeal.

For example, Nike’s -- “ one of the simplest, most recognizable slogans of all time,” writes Mindi Chahal at Marketing Week -- has been in popular currency for almost 20 years. By contrast, Reebok’s slogan has changed at least 14 times since 1987.

Avoid the error of embarking on numerous campaigns that slightly -- or, in some cases, dramatically -- modify the core brand message. This demonstrates a failure of strategy and an overreliance on tactics, a shortsighted approach that leaves the target audience confused about what your brand ultimately stands for.

4. The visual brand appears outdated and “ off message.” Another warning sign that your brand strategy is losing focus can be seen on the company website. If too much time has passed since the look and feel of the site has been changed -- and the passing of more than eight months to a year may be too long -- the message prospects get when they click on the site is that your brand may not really address the problem they’re trying to solve.

As Slider reminds us, “ A competitor with a fresher, more on-point message is just a click or two away.” The good news is that even “ small tweaks like updated images, font and new colors can make a big difference.”

Beware of so-called growth strategies that call for a series of discounts or special offers, thus undercutting the “ premium nature” of your brand. Also, resist the impulse to modify your brand in order to deal with competitors’ knock-off products; if anything, the appearance of copycat merchandise requires that you focus even more strenuously on communicating your core value to customers.

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