

The Branding Fallacy

Branding Might be Killing Your Business

Beware of the branding zombies. They regurgitate meaningless mantras like “branding is good”, “you need a brand” and “we can help you develop your brand”. These creatures only want your life blood. Unfortunately these zombies don’t look like the ones in Michael Jackson’s Thriller video. They look like you and I. They call themselves branding consultants, marketing agencies or graphic designers. And they try to sell you snake oil remedies.

It’s time for a branding wakeup call. This might hurt especially if you have recently succumbed to worship of the brand. Remember, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain” in the movie The Wizard of OZ. I’m ripping back the curtain. You might not like what you see. But it might save your business. I’m urging you, “Pay attention to the man behind the curtain.”

Let’s start by examining some of the world’s best brands.

Coke, McDonalds and Nike are powerful brands.

How did they establish their brand? A combination of millions of dollars spent on advertising, mass marketing to millions of consumers and high profile celebrity endorsements. Oh yeah and decades of promotion. The Coca-Cola Company started in 1892. The first McDonalds restaurant opened in 1940. Nike started in 1962 as Blue Ribbon sports and became Nike Inc. in 1978.

Understand the formula? Are you ready to repeat it? Probably not.

What about personal branding?

In 1997 Fast Company magazine published an article by Tom Peters, titled, “The Brand Called You”. Whether they acknowledge it or not most “personal branding experts” trace their crusade to this article.

In this article Peters points to the big corporations as the best case for branding and ergo draws the conclusion that individuals must brand as well. Just because big corporations do it does not lead to the conclusion that small business and individuals should copy. If so we would all have corporate jets.

The valid point that Tom Peters does make is that you must be distinct from your competition. That is not the same as branding. Both GM and Toyota have strong brands yet they are hardly distinct from their competition. Tom Peters is known for being provocative and attention grabbing. His own personal brand is based on the success of his

first book, "In Search of Excellence". In the December 2001 issue of *Fast Company*, Peters was quoted admitting that he had falsified the underlying data for *In Search of Excellence*. In an odd turn of events, however, he later insisted that this was untrue, and that he was the victim of an "aggressive headline". Bottom line – this article is not a convincing argument to base your marketing on or the future of your business.

Let's look at some individuals with strong personal brands. Who comes to mind? There's Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, Richard Branson and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

All have powerful personal brands. What is the common formula? Decades of promotion, multi-media exposure to millions of consumers and frequent hits.

Besides hosting the multi-season TV series, *The Apprentice*, Trump has authored over a dozen books, the first, *The Art of the Deal* in 1987. His name is on at least 20 luxury buildings around the world and he boasts a \$1 million speaking fee.

Oprah started her TV show in 1984 and it has been rated as the number one TV show. Oprah has co-authored several books, and publishes two magazines named after her – with her photo as the consistent cover shot. She is considered the richest African American ever (read billionaire).

Sir Richard Branson is known for his disheveled locks, daring stunts, collection of Virgin companies and his private Caribbean island. And of course he had his own TV show.

Arnold Schwarzenegger might be getting far less exposure while he is the governor of California. However it's easy to guess why the governor won that election. What's in his brand basket? Six time Mr. Olympia, decade spanning movie career starting in 1970 growing to a \$20 million movie fee, author and married to the niece of John F Kennedy.

And one more thing – each of them has a personal tale of loss, pain and obstacles in achieving their goals.

Given all that, it's easy for these folks to have developed a strong personal brand. It was the byproduct of everything else they did. Developing a brand was not the goal.

If you don't have those kinds of resources stop wasting your time on developing your personal brand. It will pale by comparison.

I tell this not to depress you – but to save you from the branding trance and offer you hope.

There is a better way for you to build your business. It's in nurturing relationships. As an individual or small business owner you can do something that the big corporations can't. You can build relationships with your clients and prospects. That's important because strong relationships beat strong brands. A brand is simply a weaker type of relationship.

The result of both done well is to build an emotional bond. That is the only purpose of branding. Relationships go further and deeper.

Building relationships is the better tool for small business. Relationships are about connecting with your clients and making them the heroes. Relationships are personal and individual. Building strong relationships costs very little money. It does take time, interest, and compassion. Treat every person as an individual. Make exceptions to the rules. Relationships say that your clients are special and you will treat them the way they want.

Big corporations can't build personal relationships. They are too big, bureaucratic, and impersonal. That's why they focus on branding. Branding depicts the corporation as the hero. Branding is impersonal and focuses on logos, jingles and vague imagery. Building strong brands is very expensive. It takes time, conformity and uniformity. Branding ensures that every hamburger served around the world is served exactly the same regardless of the customer's desire. Branding says our way is the right way – like it or you are a loser. That's one reason why branding is so effective when marketing to peer-influenced teenagers.

Never fight a stronger enemy on his terms. That's suicide. If your competition is Wal-Mart don't emphasize your brand. Instead emphasize your difference and your strength – personal relationships. Corporate brands are like Goliath. Nurturing personal relationships is your sling shot. It's your weapon of choice. Play to your strength and win.

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