

WILLIS ON BRANDING

Until recently, if we asked the average US marketing executive for a definition of a brand, the answer we would hear most often was simply, a brand is a logo or trademark.

The logo or trademark is no more the brand than facial features are a person. Are the logo and brand connected? Hopefully. But the logo is merely one outward representation of the brand.

Much confusion surrounds branding, particularly in B2B applications. Mainly, I am convinced this confusion occurs because there is no textbook definition for a brand. Talk to ten brand experts and you will get ten different definitions. Actually, it is quite similar to trying to describe what a person is. You can answer philosophically, but not scientifically; generally, but not precisely.

The working definition I like to use for a brand is simply this: A brand is the set of values and expectations customers place on your products or services.

Why is Harley Davidson so popular with doctors, lawyers and outlaw bikers? Because to those three groups and others, the brand symbolizes personal freedom. It embodies the personality of the rebel, the rugged individual, Americana. It oozes empowerment.

The brand is fashioned, communicated and cared for by the internal Keepers of the Brand, but it does not exclusively belong to them. The brand also belongs to the customer, both internal and external. You can influence the customers' perceptions, but you cannot control them.

The internal customer is, in fact, the key to a successful brand. If the internal customer--the employee--understands how and why the brand benefits its customers, and experiences a consistent manifestation of the brand's core values through internal policies and culture, the employee will believe in the brand. They will take ownership of the brand and will likely become a Brand Champion.

Brand Champions feel they are a part of a group of people that is really helping some other group through the medium of their product or service. This creates excitement, as a core characteristic of our humanness is the desire to help others.

When the external customer interacts with the Brand Champion and experiences his or her genuine enthusiasm, they experience the power of congruency—when internal core values are congruent with the externally communicated values. The external customer benefits from the product or service and the people behind the product or service are genuine in their desire to help them derive the benefits.

Again, a brand is like a person, and here are some thoughts that demonstrate those similarities:

- People relate to brands the same way they relate to people
- People have names, so do brands
- You can tell a person by their friends and associates; same for brands
- People have personalities, so do brands
- People have distinguishing characteristics, so do brands
- Relationships with people start with trust, the same is true of brands
- People are judged by the values they embrace, brands are similarly judged by the values they stand for
- People evoke emotions, so do brands
- It takes time to build a relationship with people and brands
- A good brand like a good friend is highly valued

The more you get to know a person, the more values and expectations you place on that relationship. It is the same way with a brand. Can you see the similarities? Is your definition of a brand expanding?

When those values and expectations are consistently met or exceeded, the external customer becomes a Brand Ambassador who can't wait to share their rare experience with a friend or colleague. This friend or colleague is called a Seeker.

Basically, we are all Seekers—looking for ways to improve our lives. There is no more powerful agent than a friend, a Brand Ambassador, recommending a brand to a friend. The expectations of the Seeker are gilded by the Brand Ambassador. The Seeker will now try the brand with positive expectations.

We like to refer to the brand as the soul of the organization. It should encompass the internal values of a company and it should offer tangible and intangible benefits to its customers. In the best organizations, employees are champions of the brand and their enthusiasm becomes so attractive that their customers can't wait to share the good news of their experience with a friend. That's the formula for a winning brand.

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