

# Building an Operationalized Brand

By Kevin Orzechowski, Creative Director, ACCESSDATA Corp.

CADILLAC. FEDEX. Citibank. As you read these names, you simultaneously form an opinion about these companies, their products, or their services. In an instant you add up everything you have read, watched, heard, experienced, and felt about them. You add in what your friends think about them. What the media says about them. And even what you haven't heard about them. In an instant, you define their brand.

A brand is nothing more than the sum of all available information about a product, service, or company. So why do some companies have a positive brand impression and others negative? To answer, we need to look at how a company communicates all of its information.

## Communicating the brand.

There are two ways a company communicates its brand. The first is through traditional corporate communications vehicles such as advertising, public relations, and marketing. This traditional brand driver called "corporate voice" is where most companies place the responsibility of building a strong brand. Each year, billions of dollars are spent on advertising and marketing promotions to persuade consumers on what to think about a particular product, service, or company.

Although "corporate voice" is an important delivery vehicle to encourage trial, provide detailed

product information, and offer pricing incentives, the public has generally grown jaded about benefit claims made in paid advertising and other promotions. Instead, the public depends on the second brand communicator, experience, to draw conclusions about the value of a product or service, i.e., "I tried it myself and it works great," or "A friend highly recommended this company because it's reliable." Consumers perceive this non-traditional brand driver as more credible than the "corporate voice".

Imagine for a moment that you have recently spent the lion's share of your disposable income on a new car. The manufacturer of this impressive vehicle claims it is "the most state-of-the-art, technologically-advanced, quality-built, reliable automobile on the market." As you spend the first few weeks driving your dream machine, you can't contain your excitement about your smart new purchase. You tell your friends, neighbors, and co-workers

what a great car you have and how they really must get one. And then you begin to experience problems. Suddenly, the car won't start on cold mornings. The 12-speaker, surround-sound system only "surrounds" the left side of your car. And the quad-zone temperature control can only be considered functional if you and your three passengers like it hot. Very hot. Now imagine the dealer can't fix the problems, the manufacturer can't be reached to talk about them, and no one seems to care except "Chuck," the tow-truck driver, who you now know intimately.

No amount of advertising or marketing muscle can overcome a bad experience. Experience wins every time. If the actual experience of using a product or service doesn't live up to the company's claims, the brand has no hope of flourishing. That's why the key to building a strong brand is to align the traditional brand drivers, corporate voice, with the more powerful, non-traditional brand driver, experience.

## Aligning the brand drivers.

To align the experience with the corporate voice, you need to first define your brand. When people hear your brand name, what do you want them to think? What information do you want them to remember so the sum equals a positive brand impression? How can you be sure your brand matches customers' needs? The answer is research — and lots of it.

Through in-depth research, you need to find out what is currently being offered in the marketplace. Next, you need to identify what customers want by understanding the industry's "hot buttons". What are the critical issues facing your customers? More importantly, what are the emotions attached to these issues? What keeps your customers up at night? What makes them angry, frustrated, or nervous? And finally, you need to take an honest look at your own company and find that certain "something" you bring to the market that you own exclusively. This is your proprietary benefit—a unique attribute about your company that no other competitor can claim.

In the end, the company that understands its proprietary benefit, fills a gap in the market, and addresses the emotional needs of its customers will create a powerful bond that's price indifferent.

Once you've defined your brand, you must then communicate it to the entire organization, so every manager, employee, and associate understands what the brand is trying to be. This is done with the brand definition.

### The brand definition.

The brand definition is a short, instantly understandable statement that includes a proprietary benefit and is easily acted upon. The brand definition humanizes the mission statement. This makes it easy for everyone throughout the entire organization to understand how the company creates value and how they impact the customer experience directly and indirectly in a way that will add to that value or detract from it. To illustrate, let's take a

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look at Disney's brand definition.

**Disney Brand definition:** To make people happy.

Disney's brand definition is not to be the best amusement park, or the best children's movie studio, the best cruise line, or the best anything. Disney believes what they do better than anyone else is make people happy. If they continue to focus on that goal, they will continue to dominate whatever business they enter. Making people happy is the yardstick Disney uses to measure every business decision. Let's see how it works.

Imagine you're at Disney's helm. Someone comes to you with an idea to open a chain of Disney banks. What's the first thing you do? Measure the idea against the brand. Will a chain of Disney banks make people happy? Banks are traditionally conservative institutions that conduct very serious business: managing other people's money. Does a chain of conservative banks where people often feel anxious

and uptight support the Disney brand? Should you create a "fun bank" where clowns work the teller booths and balloons fill the lobbies? Probably not. While this example is extreme, using the brand as your measure, it becomes clear you should operate your business in traditionally "fun" industries, including vacation, entertainment, amusement parks, movies, video games, etc., thus focusing your resources, strengthening your brand, and raising your company's value.

Now imagine you're a ticket taker in the hot Orlando sun with three thousand people in line waiting to enter Disney World. Using the brand as your guide, do you understand how to interact with customers to create an aligned "happy" experience? A big smile as you greet each customer. A call for a water buffalo so people can have a cool drink while they wait. Directions to the information booth to help an overwhelmed family find its way and focus on having fun. These are techniques you can use to positively impact the company by strengthening the brand through direct experience.

With a simple, easy-to-understand, easily-acted-upon brand definition, everyone from the CEO down, can focus their attention and resources on strengthening the brand and raising the company's value.

### The brand platform.

The brand definition is supported by the brand platform, a collection of values that will guide the company to embody its brand definition and ultimately position the brand in the consumer's mind. Here's an example of a brand definition and platform for Microsoft®.

**Brand definition:** A computer on every desk and in every home.

**Brand platform:** Microsoft products are designed for ordinary computer users, not techno-geeks. The Microsoft brand enables people to leverage the power of computing to work better, have fun, and fulfill their aspirations. Microsoft is a giant, but a friendly giant, one that puts a high priority on being simple, contemporary, approachable, hip, and even low-tech.

A low-tech, high-tech company that doesn't sell computers is focused on selling computers? Go figure! It may sound strange, but think back a few years ago, when only 2% of homes had a PC. People were afraid of the technology, intimidated to use it, yet worried it would pass them by. It was the perfect time for Microsoft, and the Microsoft brand strategy. And in light of recent court proceedings, it's clear the company's brand strategy was successful. So successful in fact, it has recently received the U.S. government's highest honor for branding achievement: an antitrust law suit.

### Centering the brand.

When business decisions are measured against the brand, management, employees, vendors and partners are clearly able to understand how every action or project impacts the overall customer experience and ultimately, the brand. The more the brand is employed as a center of gravity for business planning and operation, the more valuable it becomes to everyone. The more valuable the brand, the more profitable the company.

Specific rewards reaped from a strong brand are:

**Increased revenue:** A strong brand influences customer preference and loyalty... familiarity leads to favorability.

**Expanded customer base:** A strong brand provides security and reassurance to customers in an increasingly complex world.

**Reduced costs:** A strong brand can strengthen the bottom line by focusing resources.

**Improved workforce stability:** A clearly articulated brand definition is a rallying cry that will motivate employees, improve morale and retention, and increase recruitment. Everyone wants to work for a winner.

### Transitioning to an operationalized brand.

By making the brand an integral part of its operation, a company can ensure a consistent customer experience across multiple contact points, run by disparate disciplines within the company. No longer will the Web-site experience be different than the Customer Service Help Line experience or the Voice Automated Phone system experience. With the operationalized brand, the entire corporation works in unison to create one brand building experience that is in perfect harmony with the corporate voice ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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