

Perspectives

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Maintaining Brand Relevance Over Time

The current recession created a seismic shift in consumer behavior. Then again, consumers never stand still for very long. In a world that's constantly changing, how do you maintain brand relevance? Adaptation.

Before we begin, let's define what we mean by "brand." We think of brand not as a logo or broader identity system, but as the sum total of all the experiences people have with your employees, products and services, stores, etc. Because these people (a.k.a. consumers, shareholders, community members, employees and others) live in a world that's continually on the move, their expectations of your brand are always changing as well. To maintain relevance, it's imperative that you keep your finger on the pulse of just about everything that's happening in their lives, and be ready to adapt accordingly.

You can never stand still, no matter how established your laurels.

As you'll see from the following examples, adaptability can take many forms. These brands have not only remained relevant, but have thrived because of their ability to meet changing consumer needs, new competitive challenges, even shifting internal trends.

The fast favorite: McDonald's

There's always something new under the golden arches. And yet, year after year, the experience remains reliably familiar. For more than six decades, McDonald's has engaged consumers through a continual refinement of its products, menus, jingles, characters, packaging, sponsorships, even its signature arches. From value menus and health-conscious fast-food options to culturally correct translations of its burgers around the world, McDonald's continues to satisfy and guide consumer tastes. The takeaway: Change is a key ingredient in brand longevity.

Adaptation is often essential to meet new consumer needs, competitive challenges, even internal trends. To hesitate is to risk losing share — whether it's mindshare or share of market.

The transformer: IBM

When Big Blue, arguably one of the world's most notable innovators, lost substantial share to smaller, more nimble competitors during the PC boom, it overhauled its entire business strategy — and its brand — to meet the needs of a new wave of business consumers. What didn't change: its reputation for excellence and its iconic Paul Rand mark. Today, IBM leverages its legacy to sell things like analytics, optimization strategies and total small-business solutions, rather than laptops and mainframes, helping businesses worldwide work smarter. In essence, the meaning behind the brand hasn't changed, but to remain relevant in the 21st century, its delivery had to.

The sub-brand takeover: Target

Relevance can be measured outside of the consumer sphere as well. Once a sub-brand of Dayton-Hudson Corporation, Target so outpaced its sibling brands — Dayton's, Hudson's, Mervyn's and Rivertown Trading — that to better define enterprise value for investors and analysts, the parent company was rebranded Target Corporation. Today, Target is the nation's second-largest retailer and one of its most recognized brands. Its rise from sub-brand to super-brand illustrates the power of smart adaptation, and that sometimes the best change is a big one.

Brands we're watching

New brand stories are unfolding every day. Here are a few that we're keeping our eyes on:

Starbucks

Welcome to Starbucks' next big idea: the tiny 15th Ave. Coffee & Tea concept store in Seattle, a neighborhood-centric shop capitalizing on the growing "third wave" coffee experience. In the third wave, coffees are as distinctive as wines, and aficionados want to know their favorite bean's point of origin, down to the farm, and how and where it's roasted etc. Where the 15th Ave. concept goes remains to be seen, but it demonstrates how Starbucks is adapting its brand to meet the changing desires of coffee drinkers. (Despite the shop's independent look and feel, "Inspired by Starbucks" is a prominent component of its identity.) Will consumers buy into "authenticity brought to you by Starbucks"? Or find the idea disingenuous? How will the company differentiate these shops from true independents? And from, well, itself? Branding will play as key a role as the bean in defining and scaling this new niche.

Our socio-cultural experience is continually evolving, and along with it, people's expectations of your brand. To maintain relevance, it's imperative that you keep your finger on the pulse of ... well ... just about everything.

Yahoo!/Microsoft

The new Yahoo!/Microsoft partnership has inspired a gamut of speculation. How might Microsoft's expertise in areas other than search support useful new functionalities? Could a Yahoo!/Microsoft pairing change consumer habits online or search engine optimization? How would it impact Google's ubiquitous analytics? It's easy to imagine sweeping changes that could impact businesses and consumers worldwide.

Automotive brands

From financial bailouts for GM and Chrysler to massive recalls by Toyota, fiscal solvency isn't the only thing on the line for many automakers. Unless these companies can restore the faith of disillusioned consumers, they face a loss of credibility that will be difficult to surmount. How will they position themselves as they resolve their myriad issues? What role will each take in the revitalization of a floundering industry? Who will come out ahead? And frankly, who will survive?

The time is now

If brand watching teaches us anything, it's that if you want to remain relevant, you can never stand still, no matter how established your laurels. Even if consumers aren't changing in direct relationship to your brand, they're certainly changing in relationship to something else. And that "something" will likely impact you eventually. So if it's been awhile since you've examined your brand, there's no time like the present. And if you find that you need to make a few adaptations to stay ahead, know that you're not alone — then get to it.

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