

6 Create Your Brand or Your Market Will

ESSENTIALS STEPS TO ESTABLISHING A MEANINGFUL BRAND

BY TRISH BROCK

Every dealership wants a strong brand, but creating one remains elusive to most. It used to be that dealers could become an extension of their manufacturer's brand. This is no longer the case. Many buyers and specifiers perceive products as commodities (sad but true) and dealers unable to distinguish themselves in the marketplace offer nothing more than the next competitor. Differentiating your dealership through branding — although challenging — is the only way to eliminate (or at least minimize) the "commodity" perception.

Branding is no longer about a logo and re-branding is not about painting your trucks. It's also not about new sales literature, updated photos or a modified value proposition. A "could be claimed by anyone" statement (e.g. "we are customer service-driven") doesn't differentiate, particularly if it isn't true.

In short, branding is everything you say and do, and how you say and do it. A well branded company is and does everything it says. A brand is your company's reputation and identity — it's how you behave. Your brand is a reflection of your company's personality. It is how the marketplace experiences you.

When you have brand loyalty, you have created an emotional bond with your customers who want to associate with your brand because of like-mindedness of ethics and behavior. New customers want to associate with you for the same reasons.

If you want a strong brand, you first need to be clear in understanding who you are, and from there, who you aspire to be. Then you must be committed to activities in which you will engage to "live" the concept of your brand, becoming sustainable over time. When you achieve this, you will have an authentic brand with all the elements of your business fitting strategically together.

You have a business to run, and while all of this might make sense, most dealers have no idea where to start. Here are some steps to help you get going:

1 Get an accurate baseline. How does the marketplace experience your dealership? Like most people, companies rarely see themselves as others see them. Most choose to hear what they want to hear or assume they already know. Here's the rub: your brand is what your marketplace says it is, regardless of what you think. If you can't live up to what you say or haven't been consistent with your branding efforts, your market will create your brand for you. Before you can create your brand, you need to understand the one you already have whether it is intended or not.

The best way to obtain information is through an unbiased source, such as an independent market research effort or focus group. If that isn't possible, allowing customers, prospective customers, lost customers, manufacturers and others in your universe to give you impressions anonymously will yield more accurate perceptions.

Dealer "A," for example, thinking they already knew market perceptions,



conducted a focus group. They had been winning a lot of business and felt certain it was because of their product offering, good sales efforts and strong service reputation. What they learned from the focus group, however, was that their products and services were good, but not perceptually better or worse than their competitors. They were winning business because they were fun!

2 How does your dealership perceive itself? What is the character and personality, and how do all the people within the organization experience it? Understand that if your internal perceptions and character definitions differ, then the face you are presenting to the market is also out of alignment.

3 Compare and combine information mined from steps 1 and 2. When going through this process, most companies will have some beliefs validated, be surprised by some responses and find other responses difficult to hear, but will usually be surprised by some unexpected and positive feedback.

Regardless of how you feel about the results, you will learn how your marketplace currently experiences your dealership. Receiving the information with an open mind will make the feedback even more valuable.

4 Now you know your current "brand" in the market and appreciate how different it might be from what you may have thought. The next step is to define what you want it to be. Some traits you will want to keep, but there will be other aspects you will wish to change.

To help the process, try this revealing exercise. With your entire staff, choose three descriptive words to define the company you currently are and then another three words for what you want to be. People will offer varying thoughts, and there should be multiple discussions.

These words will help you to craft the experience you want your customers to have with you and the messages you will communicate internally as well as to the marketplace. They will begin to help you be different. They will give you direction and focus. They will help you create your brand. They will let you talk about your business in terms other than product and price.

5 Now that you have determined three words describing what you want to be, you can begin to define the activities in which your dealership must engage to become the desired dealer. When determined by the whole company, the whole company is more invested in sustaining these descriptors. You must now own these words. If you can't realistically live up to them or if you can't enforce or encourage them, then "tattoo" these words on to your own arm or find other appropriate words.


Job descriptions, training, performance evaluations, meetings, goals, business plans, budgets and communications can be gauged and directed by these descriptors.

For example, let's say one of the words you choose to become is "dazzling." How will you coach your receptionist to "dazzle" callers to your office? How will your installers dazzle your customers on the next installation? When preparing for the next sales presentation, how will you dazzle your prospective customer when they walk through the door? Will your people and materials reflect this image? If the entire organization is unified on wanting to "dazzle" the marketplace, they hold themselves and each other accountable. Nothing less is acceptable. How dazzling will you be when handling the next crisis? How will management now dazzle the staff, lead and train them to become dazzlers, recruit and retain other dazzling personalities and continue to focus on being the dazzling dealer in your market?

When doing this exercise, Dealer "A" inserted "fun" into each of these sentences and by doing so, created a powerful brand their market experiences when encountered by anyone from this company.



6 Here's the fun part. With your "brand" emerging, you can now use this to direct the creation of your visual image. Continuing with the above example, when you develop your sales support materials, website, power point presentations, letterhead, graphics for your trucks, gifts for customers, shirts for your installers or even name tags for your next event, they must all pass the "dazzle" test.

No longer left to chance, you have identified your brand and your dealership can become it and sustain it. You can be who you say you are. You will become known for your "dazzling" image, and the marketplace will associate your graphics, reputation, people, jobs, and interactions as your unique "brand." 

Trish Brock has over 25 years of industry experience and is principal of Trish Brock & Associates, a consulting group that combines strategic management consultancy with creative idea generation focused on increasing sales – assessments, training/coaching/development, marketing plans, branding and sales support materials. For more information, contact 720-277-3035 or tbrock@trishbrockassoc.com