

POWERful

BRAND

By Trish Brock

Everybody Wants One!

**Intentional or not,
you have a brand
and are known
for something.
Is it what you
think it is?**

It's probably every dealer's dream to have their brand readily recognized, particularly in this challenging environment. Most will agree that while desirable, creating a powerful brand is complicated and tricky.

One reason it is so challenging is because it is often assumed that a logo is a brand and stating a claim makes it true, when in fact, many dealers are not sure what makes them different. Some even go so far as to make something up. If it sounds good to them, then it will sound good to the market, right? Well, not exactly.

When thinking about brands, many assume it is the logo, seen frequently, that is defining the brand and therefore propelling success. Seeing a name and logo repeatedly certainly helps with company recognition, but the more important issue at hand is what emotions, perspectives and assurances come up for buyers.

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When they see brand names like yours, what does it represent? Quality? Consistency? Innovation? Service? Professionalism? Customer oriented? Easy to do business with?

Getting your name out there isn't worth much if a positive experience is not associated with it.

The emotions that brands bring up are the result of the experiences buyers (and others who know them!) have had with companies.

Do they deliver on their brand promise or, as with some companies, is their brand promise nothing more than a clever tag line with terrific graphics, minus an effective delivery process?

We can all think of companies who fail to live up to their promises. The airlines are an easy example—when was the last time you flew the friendly skies?

Customer service is an attribute that many companies both inside and outside of the office furniture industry talk about, claiming it is the focus of their organization and that they strive to be the best. But what exactly does that mean? How is that measured and by whose definition? And with competitors making the same claim, who do we believe and what makes them different from each other if they are all saying the same thing? No wonder branding has become such a daunting task.

Because some believe branding is merely about visual representation, this leads them to consider branding superficial and give it a low priority. Big mistake. Visuals are important, but they represent only the tip of the iceberg.

It is precisely in times like these that companies need a strong and authentic brand presence to set themselves apart from the competition. Buyers are looking for assurance, credibility and ways to sort through the chatter.

History has shown that those who keep focused on marketing their brand during downturns not only fare better, but often gain market share that persists for years, if not decades, after the economy rebounds.

Brand – *The Sum Total of Your Parts*

Despite what many choose to believe, branding is not simply a dynamic logo and tagline. In fact, a brand is about everything your company stands for and how the market experiences you. A logo may represent the experience but

your brand is transmitted through every contact point with customers and prospects.

Ultimately, a brand is the integration of multiple components within the organization; it is the sum total of all the parts. If the components don't function together, the brand will be vague and unsustainable. It's no wonder so many dealers struggle with their brand when many believe they are aggressively building one. Chances are good a few of the necessary parts have not been factored in.

Intentional or not, you have a brand and are known for something. Is it what you think it is?

Effective branding embodies the totality of your business: your corporate values, your interactions with customers and prospects, how well you deliver on your brand promise, dealer leadership, internal and external communications including



marketing efforts and the emotional relationship your dealership has with buyers. Understanding and then integrating all these parts will propel the development of a powerful and differentiating brand.

Before you throw up your hands and cry “uncle,” take comfort, you are probably closer than you think to achieving a powerful brand identity.

Below is a “parts list” with some thought starters. Like most, you will likely be great at many areas. But putting all the different parts together is what will set your dealership apart from the pack and help it become a powerful market presence.

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“PARTS” LIST

Current Brand – *What Are They Saying?*

Start at square one. A brand must be built upon a solid foundation, so before a brand is developed, updated or scrapped, you must first know what your current brand is. And remember, it doesn't matter what you think it is. Your brand is what the marketplace thinks it is.

Assuming you know what they think will only tell you what *you* think. You need an unbiased reality check to know for sure. Without that, you could wind up developing claims and statements that are meaningless to your audience and which could potentially work against you, wasting both your time and money. But you won't know for certain without asking.

Thought starters:

- We have a clear understanding of what the market perceives our strengths and weaknesses to be, and appreciate how they compare to the perceptions of competitors' strengths and weaknesses.
- When we identify a negative aspect of our brand, we address the issue(s) as quickly as possible and do not ignore it.
- We get unbiased, third-party feedback via research, interviews or questionnaires from customers and prospective customers instead of wondering or assuming we know what they think of us.
- Our customers can clearly articulate what is important about our brand and why they think we are different (and better).
- We understand that we already have a brand in the marketplace. Whether we have crafted one or not, the market has formed opinions based on direct or indirect experiences.

Core Values – *The Link to Your Brand*

What is it about your dealership that makes it the clear business choice? The best brands ripple outward from a company's core culture and non-negotiable standards. They are driven by what the organization believes. Determining, understanding and defining your company's core values, philosophies, and mission will yield different outcomes for each dealer.

An internal assessment, not dissimilar from the external assessment mentioned above, is a good place to start, and comparing the outcomes can be quite revealing and valuable in the process.

Values such as honesty, respect, teamwork, authenticity, giving back to the community, empowerment, etc. can be built upon to help develop your differentiating brand. The idea is to draw your values out and affirm them as important aspects of the dealership, not to construct an unrealistic world far removed from reality.

Many brands are developed by owners and management teams, sometimes with the help of a creative agency focused on external communications – corporate brochures, web sites, etc. The brand is introduced and pushed down through the organization with the expectation that people will be able and motivated to deliver the brand promise.

The views of management, however, may not be an accurate reflection of the dealership. Often not factored in to the process are “brand deliverers,” defined as everyone in your dealership who comes in contact with your marketplace. Unless the message is authentic to the values that the brand deliverers, they won't be effective messengers.

In other words, people cannot be directed what to value and believe. But if the company draws from shared beliefs where people play an active role in building the organizational brand, then they become “owners” of the brand and it becomes real. They can then “hold on” to the brand with an emotional connection that will allow them to connect and differentiate more easily with the market.

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Thought starters:

- We understand in our own minds what differentiates our dealership from our competitors, both good and bad.
- Everyone in our dealership embraces what our brand stands for and the practical benefits associated with it, and can articulate that idea(s) simply and clearly.
- Everyone in our dealership knows how they as individuals contribute and build the brand essence, are proud of it and have a stake in perpetuating the brand.
- Our brand has attracted not only new customers, but also talented employees with similar values.

Name Recognition is Not Branding. It Only Means They Know Who You Are

Brand Delivery – *Internal*

It is critical to communicate, embed and “live” your brand. A genuine commitment must be made by the entire company if the brand is to succeed. How will your dealership hold itself accountable? How will you perpetuate your differentiating brand? What can you do to bring your brand to life?

Thought starters:

- We have aligned our organizational structure, operations and culture with our brand values.
- We review and share with great frequency the role our brand plays in enhancing our competitiveness and client relationships.
- Everyone—our receptionist, accountants, designers, installers, as well as salespeople and top management—know what they have to do to deliver on the brand promise within the dealership and for the customer.
- Everyone in the dealership helps each other to be accountable to uphold the brand.
- Performance evaluations include an assessment of the contribution each individual makes to growing and enhancing the brand.
- Job descriptions and new employee orientations include adhering to brand values and describe how.
- Branding is championed by management, decisions are framed by defined values and explained by reference to them. (See Bill Kuhn’s article on Survival of the Fittest on Page 19)
- Protecting the brand is fundamental to the corporate goals of the dealership.
- We have regular communications detailing what our brand is about, including sharing of stories and examples of exemplary brand delivery.
- We encourage everyone to share ideas on how to further strengthen the brand.
- We celebrate our brand regularly.

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Brand Delivery - *External*

Communicating your brand to your marketplace will be much more effective with the above parts in place. And a lot more fun! There will be more unity in how the brand is presented through your personal customer contacts and your brand will be experienced as you intend it to be.

Marketing materials should be developed not only to be informative about your products and services. Now, they can be presented framed with your differentiating values.

Your graphics need to be as distinctive as your values; they become the entry point to your brand. You can't espouse innovation, for example, as your differentiating brand message with uninspiring and dated materials. They should be purposeful, focused and stunningly innovative.

Your communications vehicles need to be well organized, consistent and integrated with each other.

Your web site must have the same look, feel and messaging that your printed and electronic pieces have. Too many web sites

look as though they were developed by and for separate companies. There is often little resemblance or relationship which is a missed opportunity and can weaken your overall branding efforts.

Your marketing materials need to support how sales actually happen and the conversations your customers want to have. A recent study indicated that 73% of salespeople altered marketing materials before using them in the field. This is a prime reason why brands often become diluted and money is wasted. And it is all the more reason why your sales team needs to be involved in the brand development process.

Give your salespeople materials that they are anxious to use and support the shared values of the dealership. Don't allow them to act as graphic designers and create their own.

Employees who understand, embrace and "own" the brand will be brand agents. You will be better positioned to guide and manage your brand experience through their customer interactions, instead of leaving it to chance.

Thought starters:

- Our materials are cohesive, authentic and boldly project our values.
- We carefully monitor the appropriateness, timeliness, integration and consistency of all our communications.
- Everyone from our dealership who interacts with customers and the marketplace in general understands that they play an important role in furthering our brand message.
- We understand that we can't expect our market to believe our claims if they aren't real.
- While not always easy, we try to have an overall communication plan instead of implementing on the fly.
- We use our showroom and events to bring our brand experience to life.
- We understand that having a strong brand is a never ending process and not just a packaging exercise that happens every 5-10 years or when we get around to it.

When all the parts of your dealership are aligned, your brand becomes a consistent experience in your marketplace, one that energizes employees, builds buyers' trust and becomes recognized for the value you bring.

Leveraging your brand throughout every aspect of your business is what will separate you from the pack and authentically differentiate your dealership.

Making the effort to do so will not only generate benefits in this challenged economy, it will position you for even greater success as our markets recover.

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