CORPORATE BRANDING IN MARKETSPACE

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Abstract

Many existing companies have set up corporate websites in response to competitive pressures and/or the perceived advantages of having a presence in marketspace. However, the effect of this form of communication and/or way of doing business on the corporate brand has yet to be examined in detail. In this article we argue that the translation of corporate brand values from marketplace to marketspace is often problematic, leading to inconsistencies in the way that the brand values are interpreted.

Some of issues discussed are: 1) the effect of changed organizational boundaries on the corporate brand, 2) the need to examine whether it is strategically feasible to translate the corporate brand values from marketplace to marketspace, 3) the inherent difficulty in communicating the emotional aspects of the corporate brand in marketspace, and 4) the need to manage the online brand, in terms of its consistency with the offline brand. The conclusion reached is that a necessary part of the process of embracing marketspace as part of a corporate brand strategy is a plan to manage the consistency and continuity of the corporate brand when applied to the Internet. In cases where this is not achievable, a separate corporate brand or a brand extension is a preferable alternative.

Key Words: consistency of the corporate brand, websites, Internet, organizational boundaries, marketspace

Introduction

Some companies are hailing the Internet as an outstanding way to enhance their business activities, particularly those that are small and want to compete globally. On the other hand, for companies where personal client servicing is important, the assessment of the value of the Internet is less optimistic (Rasian, 2001). Yet it is clear that companies that do not adapt to marketspace can face '…painful competition from competitors who have switched their strategies to the more technologically-based relationships' (Zineldin, 2000: 9). In response to the competitive challenge, most companies have developed corporate websites.

What has often been ignored by organizations is the effect of the Internet on their positioning, particularly in cases where they already have a strong corporate brand firmly established in the marketplace. In this article, we argue that the translation of corporate brand values from marketplace to marketspace is often strategically complex, leading to inconsistencies in the communication of the core brand values between the two.

The concept of a corporate brand is first addressed and then the relationship between the corporate website and the corporate brand is examined. A critical issue is the purpose of the website in relation to the corporate brand strategy and this is dealt with next. In the concluding paragraphs the main areas of concern for companies setting up corporate websites are reflected upon.

The Corporate Brand Concept

The trend of presenting the corporation as a brand is best illustrated by an Interbrand survey, which showed that 19 out of 20 of the world's most valuable brands shared the same corporate and product brand name (Clifton and Maughan, 2000). Several writers have identified the differences between a corporate brand and a product brand (King, 1991; Ind 1998; Bickerton, 2000), alluding to the strategic importance of the corporate brand to the company as compared with a product brand. Other defining characteristics of the corporate brand are the multiple stakeholders involved, the many interfaces between the organization and its stakeholders, and the intangibility and complexity of a corporate brand as compared to a product brand.

Corporate branding is something that companies believe is important but until recently there has been little consensus about a definition. Identity, values and communication are frequently mentioned in relation to the corporate brand (Ind 1997). Balmer (2001) remarked that the corporate brand proposition should be derived from the organizational identity. He further defined the 'corporate brand mix' as consisting of '…cultural, intricate, tangible and ethereal elements' as well as commitment from staff and senior management (Balmer, 2001: 253). Hence, the concept of the corporate brand embodies the notion of communicating the values of the organization to a network of stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization, through corporate rather than just marketing communication vehicles.

Therefore, in conveying the corporate brand values it is important to develop a framework for consistent communication that ensures the continuity of the brand (Bickerton, 2000). It appears that conveying the corporate brand values consistently through the mechanism of the Internet has been a major challenge for companies. We argue that this is mainly a result of the multi-functionality of the Internet, that is, it is a unique two-way communication mechanism and/or a business.

Although there are some companies who operate their business entirely on the Internet, many established companies have set up corporate websites as an additional ‘shop front’. However, as more firms use the Internet, just having a web page is no longer a competitive advantage (Lituchy and Rail, 2000: 95). These days, a company must seek to dynamically interact with the online customer, adding value to the experience by addressing them individually, as will be discussed later.

Nevertheless, the most pressing issue that affects perception of the corporate brand in marketspace is whether the organization is using the Internet as a communications medium or as a business. The Internet has proved an unhappy hunting ground for established brands, whereas new brands like Yahoo, Amazon, eBay and America Online have captured the hearts and minds of consumers in their respective markets (Ries and Ries, 2000). The Internet as a communications medium is discussed first.

The Internet as a Communication Mechanism

The Internet has been described as ‘…an all-purpose communication medium for interacting with a wide variety of stakeholders’ (Watson, Zinkhan and Pitt, 2000: 97). The Internet can take on many communication roles including: 1) as a persuasive advertising medium, 2) as a means to educate or inform customers, 3) as a way to communicate and interact with buyers, 4) as a means of building and maintaining customer relationships, or 6) simply as a source of entertainment (Belch and Belch 2001: 19). Yet, perhaps the most significant ingredients it adds to the existing mass communication mix of television, radio, billboards and print, are those of interactivity and global reach, and the ability of the receiver to access the message at a time convenient to them.

While the Internet as a communication medium appears ideally suited to the development of increased consumer loyalty (Reichheld and Schefter, 2000), it also transforms homogeneous audiences into heterogeneous audiences (Hoffman and Novack, 1996). It is this interaction between the sender and receiver, and the mediated environment within which they interact, that changes the traditional sender-receiver view of mass communications. This has profound consequences for the transfer and/or development of corporate brands in marketspace.

Consider the incumbent organization venturing into marketspace with a solid corporate brand. The surety of their market presence is replaced by a network where there is no propriety ownership. Many companies have been faced with the problem of 'rogue' sites where consumers have voiced their complaints about them, effectively communicating to a world-wide audience. It has been said that the Internet '…has allowed us …to see the scale of … anti-corporate culture', shifting the '…power of the 'voice' in the formation of corporate reputations away from companies themselves and towards their stakeholders' (Bunting and Lipski, 2000: 173). Although in the marketplace unplanned communication was expected and often dealt with effectively by good public relations, unplanned communication about the corporate brand in marketspace has proved to be a huge challenge. Some companies have dealt with it by a heavy handed approach of trying to close down rogue sites but others have found it more effective to engage the opposition and use the feedback as a valuable information source (Bunting and Lipski, 2000).

It is important for companies to realise that the interactivity and interconnectedness of the Internet changes communication forever, and that they need to respond positively if they are to build and protect the corporate brand. The ability of the Internet to build communities needs to be embraced by organizations rather than feared. As an example of the positive use of community building, the fabric, craft and homemaker superstore, Spotlight has a website (spotlight.com.au) which encourages customers to become a VIP club members. Members can contribute to the website by sending in tips for other members on various crafty topics. They also have a VIP club Christmas night so members can get together in their local store.

Interactivity and customization offer the ability to 'co-brand' with consumers to create individual 'my brands' that complement the corporate brand (Wind, Mahajan, and Gunther, 2002). Co-branding is traditionally considered the pairing of two or more branded products to develop a unique and new product (Washburn, Till and Priluck, 2000). However, the interactive nature of the Internet enables this process to extend to the inclusion of individual consumer values. In this instance, the brand attributes of the organization and its products are varied to accommodate the degree of interaction with individual consumers. Such an opportunity is premised upon the delivery of a consumer experience through which the organization and consumer develop trust, becoming reliant upon each other to create future value (Mohammed, Fisher, Jaworski and Cahill, 2002). The emerging reality is that Internet brands are reliant upon developing unique and personalised customer experiences rather than merely attempting to reinforce existing brand values. Therefore, determining whether the Internet represents a communication medium, or in fact a business opportunity, remains a critical starting point. With the exception of a foray into customised sneakers, Nike.com have used the Internet as a medium through which their corporate brand is aligned to individuals across multiple market segments (Warner, 2000). Nike.com maintains Nike's brand equity through restricting marketspace distribution to a handful of responsible retailers who maintain premium prices. As a medium, Nike.com has been able to divert mass media advertising dollars into broadcasting events live on the Internet. Nike.com in not pursuing the Internet as a business (yet) and has enhanced their existing corporate brand through harnessing the medium's interactivity, rather than its potential as a distribution channel.

The Internet as a Business - Market Penetration or Market Development?

In addition to the primary focus on the Internet as a new way of communicating with stakeholders, Watson, Zinkhan and Pitt (2000: 98-99) list a number of ways in which companies can deploy the Internet. One common reason for setting up a website, apart from competitive pressures, is as a market penetration strategy, that is, introducing the existing company products and services to a wider range of potential stakeholders, often in the global marketplace.   In this way, the economies of scale previously enjoyed by larger organizations in relation to smaller companies are diminished. Some companies use the Internet as an additional marketing channel, taking new products to new markets. This has presented some companies with an issue as to how to present and sell their goods online without affecting the existing distribution channel and ultimately the corporate brand values.

The development of the Internet as a business is not as simple as putting the corporate brand on a website (Ries and Ries, 2000). Marketspace represents a challenging landscape within which to develop corporate brands, with many marketplace organizations unable to adapt to rapidly increasing consumer expectations (Chatterjee, 2000). Beyond the need to create a more entrepreneurial atmosphere to cope with uncertainty and rapid market/consumer change (Enders and Jelassi, 2000), the nature and application of the corporate brand again requires careful consideration. Should the corporate brand drive the pursuit of new opportunities, or should there be standalone branded products established to expand the existing market? Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000: 11) provide a timely insight through the development of a ‘brand relationship spectrum’. They posit that where the objective is to ‘…clearly position brands on functional benefits and to dominate niche segments’, the use of a ‘house of brands’ allows separation from the corporate brand's influence.

Some incumbent organizations like Coca-Cola have no pressing reason to be an Internet brand, so the medium merely supports and reinforces their existing corporate brand. However, for organizations wanting to transfer existing brand equity into developing an Internet brand, such as Barnes and Noble, a greater challenge existed. The Barnes and Noble brand was a retail bookstore with ‘…the cozy [sic] ambience of soft lighting and sofas that combined the feel of a library with an upscale coffee bar’ (Businessline, 2002: 1). Converting this to an online brand proved difficult. Apart from the fact that existing customers did not wish to shop online, the ‘barnesandnoble.com’ Web address was cumbersome. Eventually the company launched a new online brand called bn.com.

Kmart deliberately distanced its marketspace venture, Bluelight.com from Kmart to avoid association with the incumbent corporate brand (Wind *et al.*, 2002). In doing so Kmart has made available a bridge between the physical and virtual worlds for existing and future customers. The outcome has been the transformation of the Kmart brand, through the delivery of a retailing experience that offers the best of both worlds to old and new customers.

Another example in this regard is the non-relationship between General Motors and its subsidiary, the Saturn Corporation. Yet at the other end of the spectrum, the corporate brand can be the dominant brand driver, transferring the corporation’s values through its various offerings. A good example of this is the dominant influence of the Virgin brand over all of its various offerings.

The lesson appears to be that when incumbent organizations view the Internet as a business opportunity, the corporate brand must be analysed for its transferability, the nature of customer segments, product mix and competition levels (Gulati and Garino, 2000). Moreover, recognition of the role performed by the corporate brand with regards to the actual market offerings should determine the degree to which the corporate brand is involved in marketspace as well as marketplace. Given an overwhelming temptation to lend brand equity to fledgling marketspace offerings, not only is the initial treatment of the Internet as a communication mechanism or a business is critical, but also the nature of the brand architecture is an important consideration.

An example of a small business that felt that the Internet was more of a distraction than a business opportunity was given by Rasian (2001) who reported on a trading and distribution company involved in the import and export of industrial products in South East Asia. Despite cost savings, the owner of the business outlined five problem areas. One issue raised was the need for a personal touch - 'she doubted that a website - without the personal touch- could win more business for her firm …her customers refused to negotiate over the Internet' (Rasian, 2001, 4). Other issues mentioned were the need for constant upgrades of costly software, and the vulnerability of computer databases to attack by computer viruses. Hence every company needs to examine the advantages and disadvantages of applying the corporate brand to the Internet.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Internet for Corporate Branding

The advantages and disadvantages of a website over traditional media were researched by Leong, Huang, and Stanners (1998). The advantages listed by the authors included: the corporate website is an excellent way to convey text information and detail, it is a rational medium where stakeholders can obtain detailed information on products and services, it is effective for short and long term promotions, and it complements other media used by the company. One of the main disadvantages detected by the research, which directly relates to the corporate brand, is that the website is not effective in stimulating emotions (Leong *et al*, 1998: 48-49).

Since successful corporate brands usually have a strong emotional appeal, the website used as a communications medium may not be an effective way to communicate these brand values. However, when viewed as a business application, the opportunity to harness its interactivity brings emotion back into the equation. Rather than promoting the cognitive aspects of NextCard products, customers were encouraged to place their own children's school artwork on their credit cards (Wind *et al.*, 2002). Consequently, their marketspace presence allows their customers' most intimate feelings to be entwined with aspects of the corporate brand. Wind *et al.,* (2002: 243) state that ‘although initial text-heavy offering focussed on logical arguments, the more entertaining and interactive approaches today provide the opportunity for more emotional relationships’. Without a strong brand vision and appreciation of the dynamic aspects of the Internet, organizations place in jeopardy their existing corporate brand equity. In the absence of such vision, other communication mechanisms such as advertising or personal selling may still be required to communicate the emotional elements of the corporate brand. Therefore, under such circumstances a website should be seen as complementary to other media, a communication medium, rather than an end in itself.

Continuity and Consistency of Corporate Brand Values

One has only to look at corporate websites to question whether there is consistency and continuity in communicating the corporate brand. More often than not, the website is set up by an information technology consultant who may or may not understand the complexity of the corporate brand values. Case study research on an Australian home building company demonstrated this point. The website address was featured prominently in television advertising, along with the logo and the slogan, “Better by Design”. However, although the company logo and slogan ‘Better by Design’ appeared together on the home page of the website, a different slogan, “A Smart Choice”, was featured on the page ‘About Us’ and several other web pages. No doubt many other examples can be found. Consistency and continuity also relate to the tone used in communicating the corporate brand. As an example, a company that espouses traditional values and a caring attitude to customers may have a website which is set up as a ‘high-tech’ communication mechanism produced by ‘high-tech’. Marrying different forms of communication to produce a consistent tone in communication is a difficult task for most companies, exacerbated by the interactive properties of the Internet.

As organizations seek to take advantage of the ubiquitous Internet, the manner in which branding occurs may be radically altered. In short, brands can now be determined more so by the context of delivery than the content delivered (Kenny and Marshall, 2000). Traditionally, marketers manipulate three elements; content, context and infrastructure to develop brand equity (Rayport and Sviokla, 1994). However, within the marketspace, these three elements can be disaggregated, resulting in possible evaporation of existing brand equity or the development of new marketspace positioning. Again it is the determination of the Internet as a communication medium or a business that drives such disaggregation.

Setting up and Managing the Corporate Brand in Marketspace

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the management of the corporate brand online in particular and the website in general. This may require an online brand manager and other permanent employees, devoting the time to maintaining and updating information and answering emails. Respondents to a survey of United Kingdom retailers acknowledged the importance of, and the lack of, an Internet development plan (Doherty, Ellis-Chadwick, and Hart, 1999: 30). Respondents commented that some websites had not been updated for a long time and the outdated information can deter potential customers. They also described other retailers’ websites, remarking that it looked as if the some companies had ‘slapped up a corporate brochure’ and hadn’t made any changes for at least six months (Doherty *et al*, 1999: 38). This issue was researched by Ind and Riondino (2001) in their study of company attitudes towards Internet branding. In general, most of the interviewees concluded that the website should embody the organization's distinctive identity guidelines but also chose the language and strategy suitable for the medium (Ind and Riondino, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the determination of the Internet as a medium or a business is critical. In the instance of the latter, a focus on developing customer loyalty through understanding their needs (Seybold, 1998), be they latent or expressed, is essential to protecting/developing the corporate brand in marketspace. Leonard and Rayport (1997) posit that without a comprehensive appreciation of end-users, the development of the organisational/customer digital interface will be sub-optimal.

There are obvious implications here for customer relationship management. The results of a survey conducted by Lituchy and Rail (2000) on Bed and Breakfasts and Small Inns with websites illustrate this. One respondent to the survey noted that prospects often send inquiries for accommodation to *everyone* listed in their area. They have no intention of staying at more than one or two of these inns. Without superior levels of operational functionality serving the needs of both organisation and customers, customers potentially face a state of corporate amnesia (Chatterjee, 2000) during which they are not recognised consistently across marketplace/marketspace divide. A potential downside awaits those organisations that take their corporate brand into marketspace without a clear e-commerce strategy.

Organizational Boundaries and Customer Power

Organizational boundaries may change as a result of the Internet. Some researchers have advocated the use of virtual organizations, composed of firms working together in strategic alliance using the Internet as the infrastructure, as a strong business strategy of the future (Pattinson and Brown, 1996). Under these conditions, the emotional qualities of the individual organization’s corporate brand may be lost. Alternatively, collaboration between organization and consumer to co-brand, may deliver consumers with a far richer understanding of the corporate brand's identity (Mohammed *et al.,* 2002). Once again, despite the potential downside, there remains an ability to enhance the emotional qualities of the corporate brand in the marketspace.

The physicality of the company changes with the Internet. Some companies develop a website in addition to a retail outlet but others become IWOWs, or institutions without walls, where most of their value is in the electronic environment (Pattinson and Brown, 1996). It may be that a company’s retail site will become superfluous as time-poor consumers move to the Internet distribution channel. Decisions about which activities will be performed where need to be reviewed frequently. These decisions will have implications in terms of corporate brand management as the distribution channel has an effect on the way the corporate brand is communicated.

Many companies are using their websites to allow customers to pay bills, reducing their costs. Telstra, an Australian telephone company, introduced a set of rates that included a discount for customers paying their bills over the Internet. This generated negative publicity as many customers did not have access to the Internet and others do not wish to pay bills over the Internet due to security concerns. As mentioned previously, companies often sell the goods on the Internet cheaper than the prices listed at retail outlets. Inconsistencies in the treatment of different stakeholders can lead to dissatisfaction with a consequent negative impact on the corporate brand. Companies that reduce costs by asking customers to use the Internet to serve themselves may risk damaging the corporate brand by losing the soft elements such as the quality of service and customer satisfaction. Alarmingly, Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree and Bitner (2000) found 44 percent of consumers dissatisfied with their interactions with the technological interface between themselves and the organization. Technology and process failure, poor design issues and customer inability to perform their partial employee role contributed to unsatisfactory outcomes. The opportunity to communicate the value of the corporate brand to the consumer is therefore lost – what then distinguishes this company from any other in marketspace?

What is extraordinary is that many companies who want their customers to serve themselves online are in *service* industries such as banking, air transport and telecommunications. In these industries, where the products are very similar, the main discriminating factor is supposedly the service given by the company. Many dollars are spent promoting the corporate brands, using the service component as a major part of the corporate brand promise such as 'we try harder'. For many however, the message of the Internet experience thus far is clear – do it yourself so we won’t have to provide any service! The challenge for organisations entering the marketspace appears to be the development of a brand that provides a superior customer experience, based upon the individual user's own needs and capabilities.

Further complicating matters is the inevitable collision with audiences to which application of previous traditional segmentation approaches has proved less than optimal. It has been suggested that a new consumer has emerged as a result of the Internet. The 'centaur' is a half traditional, half cyber consumer, whose composition changes depending on how they view their relationship with individual corporations (Wind, Mahajan and Gunther, 2002).

Conclusion

Communicating the corporate brand is a difficult task at the best of times. The inability of organisations to appreciate the Internet as either communications medium or a business, but not both, does nothing to make this easier. As a medium, adjustments to the communication strategy need to be made to ensure that what is being communicated via the corporate website is consistent with the corporate brand values and is complementary to other corporate communication and positioning in the competitive market. As a business, the Internet represents an opportunity to collaboratively co-brand an interactive experience. A symbiotic relationship is possible through the interaction of organizational and customer values/identity. In this paper a number of these issues have been discussed. In relation to the use of the website, the emotional values of the corporate brand represent both a hurdle and an opportunity. Also, the consistency and continuity of the brand may be threatened by the way in which 'high-tech' consultants construct the web pages. The physicality and organizational boundaries of the firm may be in a state of flux, leading to inconsistency in corporate brand communication. If one is in a service industry where the brand promise relates to effective service, then levels of customer satisfaction with Internet interactions need to be appreciated and measured. What appears to have happened in many cases is that the Internet has a life of its own, dictating the way in which companies communicate, rather than companies first determining how they can use the corporate website to more effectively communicate the corporate brand in a way that is complementary other communication strategies. Otherwise, the corporate brand becomes a casualty of the technology. Finally, in cases where difficulties exist in the translation of the corporate brand values into marketspace, consideration must be given to the development of a new corporate brand or a brand extension. If the marketplace corporate brand does not make sense online, the corporate brand as it previously existed may be damaged.

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