

Marketing Strategy:

Branding

Why noble professionals are like cans of soup



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Strong relationships have always been the backbone of business stability in design and construction. But as great as relationships and word-of-mouth-marketing might be, they give you no control over the rate of growth of your company or the inevitable peaks and valleys of the economy. However, if you take charge to create and nurture strong brand-name recognition for your company you can jump-start terrific relationships with larger numbers of qualified prospects, which will lead to sales opportunities and reliable growth rates.

What do these companies have in common?

IBM	H&R Block	Marriott	AT&T
Fluor Daniel	Microsoft	Volvo	FedEx
KPMG	Service Master	Hertz	Southwest Airlines

Each one of them has:

- A name that is well known by customers, potential customers and, in most cases, the general public
- A leadership position in their markets
- A consistent and reliable 'product'
- The absence of any specific individual who is the face of the company
- A reputation that can withstand a few knocks
- The strength to withstand the ups and downs of economic cycles

That all adds up to:

- A strong brand image.

A brand is a promise. A promise of quality, consistency, and reliability that's known and trusted far beyond the company's customer list. That promise isn't made through marketing or advertising. That would be too easy. Instead, it's made by consistent performance over time. But here's the twist – that great performance has then been aggressively broadcast through marketing communications, promotions and advertising as well as enthusiastically spread by word-of-mouth.

Then, because the dependability of the promise is so well known, new customers feel safe in using or purchasing your brand even without personal experience.

At the same time, existing and past customers are confident they'll receive the same quality and reliability when coming back to work with you again.

The brand images of the companies we mentioned above are strong, valuable assets that attract customers. Customers trust these branded companies to provide consistent, dependable performance. Customers also expect those companies to maintain, and even continuously improve quality and reliability.

Brand image has profited product manufacturers and service providers for decades. It's an 'equity' that has been instilled in the mind of existing or prospective customers – a built-in trust that's triggered simply by the company name or logo image. Think of the power of the brand image of Campbell's Soup, McDonald's, or Ritz Carlton Hotels. Just the names alone immediately evoke powerful images of product or service consistency.

Design and construction companies can use branding too

A strong brand image offers you invaluable advantages.

- It gives your company a pre-established trust — before any customer relationship is built. Customers show up already wanting to buy what you sell. Compare that to individuals who want to weigh your services (and your prices!) against others they think are equal.
- It provides 'front-end' marketing. That means that your company's name and reputation extend to potential customers you'd have never reached through traditional business development efforts.
- The brand strength exists independently of any one person. Customers know they'll receive the same quality and service regardless of who they deal with. A company whose value is driven by a single individual or a small group is severely limited in its ability to grow.

- It creates goodwill within your customer base, which translates to value that will handsomely reward shareholders. Potential acquirers are attracted to companies that have goodwill value beyond that contributed by any single individual.
- It offers a safe choice for buyers who want to avoid risk. (Hence the old phrase, "no one ever got fired for buying IBM.") In an economic downturn, a strong brand image attracts people who still must do projects but want to minimize their risk.

Predictably, there can be a downside to a strong brand image too. In some

Brand image is an equity in the minds of existing and prospective customers.

cases it can limit diversity. Imagine trying to launch:

- McDonald's Gourmet Bistro
- Dodge Caravan Sports Racing Team
- Motel 6 Luxury Resorts

While the entrenched image of a strong brand can prevent it from expansion into new markets, the benefits virtually always outweigh any disadvantage.

The two sides of branding

Like a coin, there are two sides to consider when embarking on a branding effort:

1. Making the promise through your marketing
2. Delivering the promise through project execution

Making the promise with marketing

Traditional marketing in design and construction focuses heavily on sales. With this approach, we spend the bulk of our time chasing individual projects.

The effort is highly dependent on specific individuals and the quality of their relationships with prospective customers. In this scenario, business health swings heavily with economic changes.

In contrast, contemporary marketing balances the sales effort with an equal emphasis on promotional communication. Strong promotional efforts build name recognition and enhance your firm's reputation by repeating a positive message, which aggressively builds the equity of your brand. It also gives your business a significantly larger marketing base, producing two benefits:

- a. You have a much larger number of prospects wanting to do business with you.
- b. You're less vulnerable to economic swings.

Building brand awareness (what marketers sometimes call 'mind-share') can be done using a number of different tools and activities. Different markets call for different tools in order to be effective, and it's never wise to attempt to use them all. The available tools include:

- Consistent graphic identity
- Brochures
- Public relations
- Direct mail and direct e-mail
- Company newsletters
- Membership and active involvement in key associations
- Writing and publishing of articles
- Special events and seminars
- Trade shows and exhibitions
- Media advertising
- Awards
- Web sites

Delivering the promise through execution

Any business that builds a strong brand image is process driven. It establishes a successful process for accomplishing its work and then focuses on managing that process. Individual projects or products come and go, but the process by which they are devel-

oped and completed gives the company its strength and competitive advantage. Over time, continuous fine-tuning and adjustment of the process makes it more effective and profitable. Customers depend on this consistent, reliable process to deliver the same unfailing service time after time.

Design and construction professionals, on the other hand, tend to be project driven. They work from one project to the next with less regard for a standardized process that would make the production of work faster, easier, more accurate, and more reliable. In short, they work with little regard for building a brand image.

Because of the intense focus most companies place on maximizing billable time, the incremental improvements that are made in the process are developed in rare moments of 'stolen' time. Compounding this problem is the strong belief that every project is different and should be approached with a clean slate in order to give the client maximum value. Making a standardized process more challenging still is the strong tradition of individuality, especially among design professionals. Each one has, and vigorously defends, what he or she believes to be the best process.

The company that's interested in building brand equity recognizes this challenge and works to develop standardized processes and best practices that individuals then use to provide customers with the best possible value. This approach allows the firm to accomplish projects faster, more accurately, and at lower cost, regardless of the individual or team members working on the job.

What does it take to adopt a branding strategy?

There are three keys to adopting a successful branding strategy.

1. Develop an attitude of 'investment' in your brand.

A strong brand image can only come from a strong commitment to upgrade both marketing and project delivery.

Promotional marketing, using the

tools we've already described, is foreign to most design and construction professionals. They're more accustomed to pursuing individual project opportunities than spending money on broadcast marketing communications.

The chief obstacle is the inability to provide precise outlooks or even measurements for return on investment. When Coca-Cola puts a billboard on the side of the highway, they don't even try to measure the increased sales that it generates. They know, however, that it contributes to overall brand awareness. That awareness will always pay off in sales.

2. Increase the sophistication of your marketing effort.

Most design and construction professionals are – how shall we say this? – unsophisticated in their understanding and practice of marketing. They focus the majority of their marketing efforts on pursuing individual projects rather than building mind-share within a much larger group of prospects.

To succeed in a branding effort, learn how marketing actually works and be willing to adopt a more balanced approach that combines a strong sales effort with strategic planning, promotional tactics, and a coordinated effort with the project delivery teams.

3. Develop an intense focus on consistent, reliable project delivery systems.

A branding effort will quickly collapse if it is based on marketing alone. Customers won't take long to realize that the promise made during the sales phase was a hoax, and a strong, but negative brand image will spread quickly.

Instead, you must think of your company as a 'project factory' in which no one project is any more or less important than another. By focusing on the process, you can establish a delivery system that can be duplicated by any project manager.

It's time for you to adopt a branding strategy

There are some very good reasons why maintaining a sales-oriented strat-

egy will hurt you in the long run. There are some equally compelling reasons why adopting a branding strategy can help you achieve a competitive edge.

1. A marketing strategy that is heavily weighted towards sales is both expensive and time-consuming.
2. A marketing strategy that is heavily weighted towards sales does not create enough opportunities to allow predictable, controlled growth.
3. A marketing strategy that is heavily weighted towards sales is extremely susceptible to the up-and-down economic cycles.
4. A strong branding strategy turns all your customers, and even many people who aren't customers, into enthusiastic volunteer marketers for your firm.
5. An aggressive branding strategy develops strong and measurable goodwill value for your firm, independent of any particular individual, with very good implications for mergers, acquisitions, and ownership transition.

In today's competitive market, branding helps many companies achieve a strong competitive edge. It's time to let it work for you.

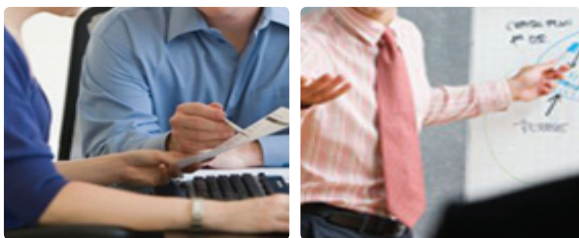
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