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## Top of Mind: Jumping Off the Branding Bandwagon

Over the past decade, branding has gone mainstream. The overwhelming majority of ad agencies, pr firms and Web designers, Hollywood agents and management consultants - and even a few focus group participants - have jumped on the branding bandwagon.

Every purveyor of fine branding boasts sole proprietorship over the "unique methodologies," "outstanding insights" and "talented staff" that are certain to transform a banal, undifferentiated product or service into something Larger than Life: a Great Brand.

But after years of spending seven, eight or even nine figures on branding schemes, marketing directors are coming under increasing pressure to deliver tangible business results. And a growing number of them are now waking up to the sobering fact that, by and large, branding has failed to build great brands.

What's more, most great brands weren't built on branding at all. In fact, branding and great brands are made of altogether different stuff. Branding seeks to create reality through perception and emphasizes communications. Great brands, meanwhile, create perceptions through reality. Branding seeks to gloss over a lack of differentiation, while great brands are built from the inside out, on differentiation.

Branding aficionados are quick to claim credit for success stories such as Apple, the VW Beetle and Nike, and cite the outstanding ads created for these truly great brands. A convenient confusion of cause and effect: these brands didn't become great because of good ads. Rather, unique and differentiated propositions made for good ads. Apple computers really are easier to use; the VW Beetle really looks different from any other car on the road; and the world's greatest athletes really do wear Nike.

Great brands make for great communications because they speak for themselves. Not by coincidence, the best ads for VW and Apple feature the product in front of a plain white background. A Beetle or an iPod are unique•nything else would distract. A Harley can even be identified from blocks away, by its deep gurgling roar.

Branding, on the other hand, tends to produce clones. Slap a competitor's logo on most ads and it works just as well (or as badly). Having nothing to say for themselves, the products of branding•rom New York Life to Toshiba to Reebok•re addicted to borrowed equity, from babies to breasts, from heart-wrenching melodies to lame jokes, from leafy roads to grandiloquent clichés about the "road of life."

Does anyone really believe that a Buick is Tiger Woods' car of choice, or that Celine Dion would freely choose a Chrysler Sebring to find her true love?

More enlightened CEOs and marketers are already reevaluating their companies' stance toward branding. Cingular had some of the strongest advertising in its industry by branding standards, using a compelling logo

(nicknamed "Jack") to identify the company with self-expression. Stanley T. Sigman, the company's CEO, however, opted for a radical change in direction: rather than tout lofty ideals, the new "Cingular fits you best," campaign focuses on specific, tangible reasons to choose Cingular and not its competitors.

Branding advocates might claim that such an approach is "too rational," and therefore not suited to building an emotional connection with customers—the underlying assumption being that reason and emotion are somehow opposed. In fact, the opposite is true: just as they do in their interpersonal relationships, people only connect emotionally with companies that provide a reason to choose their products or services.

Cingular is not the only company jumping off the branding bandwagon. Though Ernst & Young for years ran the strongest brand communications campaign in its industry, CMO Jim Speros is now taking the company's marketing onto a decidedly rubber-meets-the-road path. "We're taking the brand to a level where it makes 'contact' with audiences," says Speros. "It's about proving our grasp of the specific issues they're tackling in their specific industries. Only when you show that and how you're listening to clients or prospects do you have permission to come back to them with solutions that map back to their specific needs."

The new, reason-based communications approach relates to both medium and message: Ernst & Young is now taking a decidedly vertical approach, via auto or industry journals and events. Incomparably less glamorous than brand ads on CNBC, but much more relevant to specific audiences, and justifiable in terms of ROI for the marketer.

Marketing directors who are serious about building great brands focus on relationships with audiences as a whole and see communications as merely one means to that larger end. As Speros puts it, agencies are equipped to deal with promotion. There's nothing wrong with that—that's what you hire them for. But a brand manager must take account of marketing's remaining P's: product, price and place.

Building great brands is first and foremost about creating and unearthing differentiation. For marketing directors, that means more time spent working with the builders in their company: engineers, food scientists and technology experts. Equally, building great brands means refocusing agencies and other vendors on what they do best: bringing differentiation to life through great communications; motivating customers to buy and prospects to try.

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