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The power of brand: Choosing the right lever for your business challenge

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When your business is at an inflection point, one of the most powerful levers you can pull is the one marked “brand.” Why? Because evolving the brand strategy at pivotal moments can help quickly signal a shift in the company to key stakeholders—driving belief and assuring audiences through inevitable change. There are a few key phases in a business cycle when deploying a brand especially pays off.

In the following scenarios, here’s how to best use branding to your advantage.

Go to market

When you’re entering a marketplace, your biggest challenge is a lack of awareness. And your second-biggest challenge is your target audience’s apathy. In this scenario, brand drives differentiation.

The first step to pulling this lever is to develop brand positioning that distinguishes you from your competitors. What is everyone else saying, and how can you show up in a way that is meaningful, ownable and authentic?

The next step is to develop brand messaging that builds consistency around this differentiated positioning. Everywhere your potential customers experience your brand, they should have a compelling and cohesive experience.

The final step is developing a strong visual identity for brand recall. The visual identity should be informed by your positioning and industry and feel differentiated in the category without becoming trendy.

IPO

I’ve worked with a lot of companies preparing for their IPO, and the No. 1 priority here is investor education. Investors might be wary of taking on too much risk or remain unclear on the growth potential. So, here, brand really works to establish credibility.

The first and most valuable thing you can do is merge business strategy with brand strategy. Brand shouldn't just live in the marketing department—it should be an embodiment of your business strategy and activated across the different business units.

Businesses will often then undergo "professionalizing" to prepare for rapid growth. That means giving the brand a cohesive identity and expression guides and, often, leveling up the appearance of the brand for a broader, more discerning audience.

Then you really just want to get that new brand out there as much as possible. Investor relationships branding that communicates the growth and potential is a great start, as is brand storytelling that highlights the business journey and its future. And, of course, you'll want to include media and PR strategy, as well as content that generates positive sentiment and casts your brand in a responsible, authentic light.

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Mergers and acquisitions

Another phase when brand is a benefit is during mergers and acquisitions. These big business changes often beget confusion and uncertainty, both externally and internally.

The biggest landmine here is emotion. Both companies are likely to feel strongly about their brands and about what should change or stay the same. It doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. I usually advise that companies undergoing this change engage in some research to uncover how their audiences perceive them. Determining brand equity via data can help alleviate emotion-driven decisions, and so can crafting a brand that works hard to put the best attributes forward, whatever those might be.

Usually, the data will suggest one of three things: sunsetting all but one existing brand, turning some brands into sub-brands or creating a new, unified brand. Whatever the data indicates, the most important thing to keep in mind is that any rebrand or reorganization must be paired with internal and external communications that educate clients or customers on how this M&A activity will benefit them. This can be done through PR, internal branding and employee engagement and content marketing—all of which should work in tandem to communicate the strengths and benefits of the merger.

Modernizing a legacy brand

Compared to startups, leaders at legacy businesses with incredible heritages face the unique challenge of keeping their brand feeling fresh and modern without losing the earned gravitas of its experience. Without consistent brand maintenance, companies can slowly start to slip into obsolescence, as customers perceive them as stodgy and outdated.

I often encourage our clients to engage in brand evolutions, not revolutions. Your customers are with you for a reason. It's not about changing completely; it's about changing the right things so that you're relevant to your audience's needs today.

Brand's power here is in fostering relevance. You can start with an equity study to gain an understanding of what works and what needs to change. After you have the insights to move forward, you can engage in a brand refresh across your identity and expression. This can then be pulled down into your owned channels, particularly via a digital update to websites and mobile app experiences.

For some clients, I also recommend influencer and brand partnerships to develop cultural relevance and to get in front of a younger audience that might not know you as well as their predecessors.

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Preparing for takeoff

Marketers today are under ever-increasing pressure to deliver results on the investments they make. Branding can be a powerful tool to drive your business objectives, but before taking action, think critically about the challenges you're trying to solve. Investing in professionalizing your brand won't work if you're fighting irrelevance, and rebranding immediately after an M&A won't help if you don't know what brand attributes are necessary to carry forward. Making decisions without doing this work is like a surgeon trying to operate without a diagnosis or an auto mechanic removing an engine without knowing what that warning light means.

Identifying which lever to pull will give you a crystal-clear idea of what you're up against and start to shed light on the right ways to overcome it. Then you can go about identifying brand strategies to aid in your fight. This focused approach can help you turn your next inflection point into your next career highlight.

This article was originally published in Forbes.