

B-to-B Branding: Consumer Models Need Not Apply

The term *branding* is often misunderstood and not always warmly embraced in the business-to-business environment. It is difficult to take a process that is typically used to describe the creation of yet another toothpaste in the consumer world and apply it to the marketing of electronic components, high-tech machinery or multi-million-dollar factory automation systems in the B-to-B world.

Adding to the confusion, some branding consultants try to apply a consumer-branding model to business-to-business markets, often with unsatisfying consequences. One client actually said, “Branding is a bad word around here.” No wonder. After investing millions of dollars in a brand consultant and five years of time, the company had established only one thing—a color.

Does that mean that branding has no business in business-to-business? Absolutely not. In fact, branding is a vital component of some of the most successful client marketing programs our agency has ever implemented. The key is recognizing what makes B-to-B branding different from consumer branding and making those differences work for you.

A Little Branding Background

Branding is the process of defining and differentiating your company and how you add value to your markets and customers. Over time, the simplest expression of your brand comes to symbolize the host of values that differentiate you. These values are confirmed by your customers’ experiences with your company and your products. Positive experiences build preference and affinity that go beyond the features, benefits, and even the performance of your products. Here, there is no threat of commodity status.

How Is that Different from Consumer Branding?

As a broad statement, branding in the consumer world usually conjures up images like celebrities peddling cell phones, where lifestyle and image are everything. B-to-B branding, by contrast, is a practical discipline, focused much more on products and services and their performance in application. Emotional appeals and lifecycle influences are minimal; B-to-B customers are driven by technical requirements, production issues, and performance expectations, which must be met in an efficient, reliable and predictable way.

A semiconductor manufacturer, for example, does not care if your product has a celebrity endorsement or if he can see your commercial on television every morning. He cares whether or not your product can meet his cleanroom specifications and production goals. He will talk to engineers, manufacturing personnel, and business executives about whatever problem he is having that day and what products or services can offer him a real solution. He will go to trade publications and read application stories. He’ll go to the Web and research similar applications and the products and services they use. He’ll call and visit other professionals in the field to find out how they’re doing it, what works, and what doesn’t. You simply cannot cram this type of branding into a flashy commercial or ad.

Product performance and the customer’s overall experience with your company have more lasting impact on brand affinity than advertising or other communications. It’s much less about perception, and much more about reality. This underscores the importance of *living the brand*, so the customer’s experience with the company pays off the promises made in the brand communications.

The B-to-B Buying Process

By nature, the buying process in B-to-B is also different. For one thing, it is usually not one buyer, but instead teams of buyers from different disciplines and functional areas. This greatly minimizes the impact of emotional drivers on the buying decision and instead injects practical, financial and performance driven objectives into the decision-making process.

In the B-to-B world, you must understand this buying process. There are no shortcuts. To demonstrate to potential customers the complexity of the buying process, just consider the typical list of buying influencers for a B-to-B marketer. The list includes:

- C-level executives
- Design engineers
- Manufacturing engineers
- IT professionals either buying a product or having an influence
- Purchasing, procurement or supply chain professionals
- Consultants, integrators, specifying engineers
- Distributors, dealers or other intermediaries

Each of these influencers may value something different when it comes to a product or service. The more you know about your customers and their buying processes, the more relevant your brand and related values and messages will be.

The Company As the Brand

While product brands certainly exist in the B-to-B space, the more common situation is when the company is the brand. There are several good reasons for this.

- First, in the B-to-B world, many companies have multiple products, technologies, or divisions. To build each of these into a brand would be prohibitively expensive. Most B-to-B companies simply don't have the resources to build brand power for multiple products.
- Second, many B-to-B marketers provide support to their multiple products, technologies, or divisions with one service entity. Since service is such an important part of the B-to-B purchase and experience, it makes sense to use the company name as the brand.
- Third, products come and go; technologies are born and they die; divisions are acquired and divested. For a B-to-B marketer in the high tech or other rapidly evolving field, hitching your wagon to anything less than the company brand can be a one-way ticket to oblivion.

Achieving Success with B-to-B Branding

Executing a B-to-B branding program requires focus and discipline to use the myriad of communication channels effectively and efficiently. Ultimately, a company's branding success is driven by two factors:

1. How effectively it can shape the definitions of who it is and how it adds value to its markets and customers.
2. How well those internal definitions are aligned with external realities, especially the needs, expectations and perceptions of customers and channels.

Godfrey understands the unique aspects of the B-to-B market and applies them to our clients' branding challenges. We develop and execute effective strategies that create a compelling brand experience and move our clients to a higher level of competitive advantage and customer affinity.

**B-TO-B BRANDING:
IDEAS THAT CONNECT**

1. B-to-B companies cannot thrive without real business differentiation.
2. Differentiation is a business decision about the company's positioning and values, i.e. how the company adds value to a customer relationship.
3. In B-to-B, the company is often the brand.
4. There are many ways that companies make buying decisions; most involve teams of people from areas throughout the business.
5. Successful companies integrate their positioning into all decision-making processes and market communications.

For more information, contact LANCE BAIRD at 717-393-3831.

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Godfrey provides full-service, integrated business-to-business branding and marketing communications services. The agency offers research, brand management, advertising, public relations, digital marketing, search (SEO and SEM), media, direct marketing and analytics services.