

Branding in a Web-centric World

Business-to-business marketers invest enormous resources in developing, refining and delivering their brand message. To be successful, you must communicate your brand consistently and sustain its unique value to every audience you target.

Branding is more than logos or slogans: For the most successful B2B brands, branding defines and differentiates your company and how you add value to your markets and customers. A company is more than just its products or services: In the mind of your customers, prospects and all the audiences you seek to influence, your positioning, your values already exist. It is sustained and confirmed by their real-world experiences with your products and services.

In the past, controlling your brand messages was a straightforward process. In our current Web-centric, Web-driven world, managing your brand—keeping its messages true to the value you actually offer—has become a more complex and interactive task, one that challenges B2B marketers to exercise greater message discipline, and simultaneously be open to dynamic, even chaotic, modes and channels of communication.

Mapping Your Brand Message

To successfully map your messages and sustain brand control in a Web-centric world requires a strong and clear foundation. Just as you have multiple products, multiple customers and multiple audiences, you have multiple messages that form the structure of your brand architecture. Unlike much of consumer advertising, where lifestyle and image are everything, B2B brands are built on messages—performance, benefits, results—that arise from much more tangible elements: technical requirements, production issues, functional expectations which must be met in an efficient, reliable and predictable way.

Your brand's architecture can be viewed as a pyramid. The top of the pyramid is your positioning statement, the capstone of your brand: A single statement that sums up your fundamental value to your market. At the next layer are your values, competencies and differentials. At the base are your key products and services, with specific messages based on the key strengths and benefits they offer.

The strength of your brand is measured in how well you control and integrate these messages in every communication medium and tactic. *Every* message is a brand message—from the top positioning line, right down to individual product performance claims. In B2B branding, product performance and the customer's overall experience with your company have lasting impact on brand affinity. And in a Web-centric world, more than ever before, the messages about that overall experience can be communicated as fast, and with as much impact, as any carefully crafted marketing program you can create.

The Web Can Fragment Your Brand

The Web is now the principal engine for B2B branding—and that fact creates the greatest challenge to brand management and message mapping, because the Web is uniquely suited to fragment and disrupt the discipline and integration B2B marketers once had over their messages.

Instead of easily managed communications channels—trade ads, tradeshow appearances, press releases and sales collateral—that use a classic “push the message out” model, the B2B marketer is confronted with:

- Vastly multiplied channels—industry websites, blogs, social media channels such as Twitter and YouTube, podcasts—that generate, share, forward, comment on, cut-and-paste and otherwise manipulate your messages...sometimes to the benefit of your brand, and sometimes not.
- Extremely compressed message cycle—from days and weeks down to hours and minutes—demanding constant attention and the ability to respond.
- Interactive/multi-directional messaging—both inside and outside your enterprise, your messages are no longer strictly yours, your brand is no longer strictly yours.

This last difference is the most critical. While it was always true that your brand is based on perceptions that exist in the minds of your customers, with the Web, user-driven messages can have just as much impact on your brand as all your marketing communications investments. So it's important that you embrace that truth and make it work for your brand.

Sustaining a Web-centric Brand

Branding in a Web-centric world is a conversation—more than one, actually, and if you're not careful, the conversation can quickly get off-topic. If you want to make your messages clear, and sustain them to help keep your brand differentiated, then the center of your Web presence must be aligned with your brand. Then, there are three key practices you can apply to help sustain clear, effective brand messages that help drive strategic integrated marketing.

- **Exercise discipline**—Make sure every message, at every level, reinforces the brand. Executing a B2B branding program in a Web-centric world requires focus and discipline, using both existing and emerging Web channels effectively to shape messages of what your brand is, and how your business adds value to its customers and markets.
- **Engage complexity**—Otherwise known as “we can't go back”: Communications channels will continue to multiply, multiple audiences will actively participate in your brand's evolution and the message cycle will only get shorter. Treat this as an opportunity to leverage the reach and sophistication of cutting-edge Web resources such as social media to bolster your brand, refine its impact and value, and cultivate new audiences, markets and customers to help grow your business.
- **Prepare for the unknown**—Responsiveness is key, backed by constant vigilance. Tools such as SEO, keyword analysis and social media audits can identify where you have weak points, poor integration or wasted resources, and help bring your approach to branding more fully in line with the demands of a Web-centric world.

Invest in Building a Web-centric Brand

The right investment in building and sustaining your brand messages across your Web presence will pay dividends in improved customer relationships, stronger and more effective use of social media, and a clear brand that differentiates your business and contributes to your competitive advantage.

Forthcoming Godfrey *Branding in a Web-centric World* White Papers will explore key practices we have established and successful techniques we have introduced that are helping B2B businesses maintain message discipline, solve complex Web messaging challenges, and equip them to strengthen the value of their B2B brand in a Web-centric world. Please visit www.godfrey.com for your copy of each new issue in this series.

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