

Under the skin of brands

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Rarely has a new addition to the business vocabulary been able to match the impact that the word 'brand' has had. In a few short years it has taken root firmly in the business vernacular.

Some people view 'brand' with suspicion. They suspect something lightweight, a triumph of style over substance, a kind of 'flower arranging' for business. And yet, paradoxical though it may seem, these brands (and observations about them) can strike fear into CEOs, knock millions off share prices, and cost people their jobs or pay packets.

So brands are far from inconsequential but are they cosmetic or indeed malevolent? I don't think so. Much of the cynicism surrounding brands is a reaction to the marketing industry itself which, sensing a fad in the making, has jumped on the 'brandwagon' while neglecting to understand it first.

Brands are important, and you get a good understanding of just why they are important by considering your own buying behaviour and that of others – from the drinks or magazines favoured by your children to the 'old favourites' where your parents like to shop.

Brands are about people's perceptions - which explains why brands are worth so much. In a competitive marketplace where customers are free to choose they don't always select on price (in fact they rarely do). Choice is driven by a hunch, by a remembered story, by a perception of good corporate citizenship, by experience, by a thousand little reasons which become important at the second that the decision to purchase is made.

A brand is the sum of all the perceptions held by a particular audience about a firm's products or services. And everything a business does and says has the potential to influence its brand. Cellnet's brand received a boost when it changed its name to O2, while Orange received great applause when it introduced per second billing. On the other hand, Andersen's brand was so sullied by recent events at Enron (and latterly Worldcom) that its partners are now ditching it and rushing to sign

up with rival accountancy firms.

The lesson for all of us is that brands are built not just through external communications but also through the quality of the product itself and of the company behind it, including the behaviour of staff and the nature of the whole customer experience.

The old adage 'actions speak louder than words' has clearly been lost on those marketing people who prefer to focus on advertising, PR or design at the expense of behaviour or product capability. A popular myth is that brands are about logos. Of course, design is important in presenting a confident and consistent face but ask yourself, do people really buy Levi's jeans because of the logo? Did All Bar One revolutionise the pub just with the sign above the front door?

This is common sense. A sandwich shop doesn't become a Pret a Manger by adopting its signage – or even by introducing red-topped bar-stools and mirrored walls. Legally it could be part of the same chain, but if the service wasn't up to scratch, people would say 'this isn't what I expect from Pret'. Worse still, if this happened a few times, customer perceptions of Pret itself – the Pret brand - would be damaged.

This is also where rebranding can fall down. There are, of course, good reasons for wanting a facelift, whether it's a deep-seated urge for change or a fundamental feeling that things are not right. But the trouble with many facelifts is that is all they are - a change of face without a change of substance. When the core is rotten, changing what's on the surface will have minimal impact on the brand – on people's perceptions.

For any business involved in building a brand, achieving internal understanding (and better still, engagement with) the brand is essential. If staff understand their role in contributing towards the brand – and if they agree with the intended direction of the brand – you're well on the way



to delivering a consistent experience.

The merger of easyJet and Go demonstrates just how hard this task can be. It's only a matter of a few months since Go aircrew referred to their new owner as 'the nasty orange company' in their cabin announcements, so it's difficult to imagine that particular integration going smoothly! The merged company can (and presumably will) update the liveries of its aircraft and provide its staff with new uniforms - but that's only the start.

Businesses need to see themselves as brand-owners and to understand the importance of doing whatever is necessary, not only through customer communications but internally as well, to enhance and protect one of their most precious assets – the way they are seen by others.

Copycats hit the headlines once again

In February the marketing press reported the launch of Tesco's Temptations crisps in packaging similar to Walkers' Sensations crisps. Tesco, which stated back in 1998 that it would no longer copy competitors' packaging, has denied any copying.