

Unsung business superbands

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Brands are certainly an enigma. They surround and influence us, as we in turn, either as consumers or competitors, influence them. In the last issue of *British Brands* the insightful article by Jeremy Bullmore provided a reminder to brand managers and owners that we are not in full control of our brands. As living entities it is impossible to control the brand, both as an asset and in the way it is perceived by those with whom the brand seeks to relate.

Yet while this may be true, it is essential that we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of those brands and brand managers that have succeeded in building trust, authority and understanding with consumers and in building a powerful overall brand proposition. The fact that the brand is a living entity in symbiotic relationships with vast numbers of stakeholders means that it is the most difficult asset of the business to manage. This is the reason there are so few real Superbrands in existence.

Acknowledgement

There is one area of business where brands and marketing are still not always given the appropriate resources, respect and top level support that befits their importance. Recently our Business Superbrands Council sought to identify those business–business brands that truly deserve recognition in branding terms. This process highlighted the importance of building a powerful business–business brand and the key elements needed to do so.

Importance of strong business brands

Strong brands are essential in business–business markets for many reasons. They simplify the selection process. They get you in the door and on the pitch list. They provide the foundation to build relationships. They give meaning and direction to strategy. They guide and support the recruitment process. They contribute to the motivation and satisfaction levels of staff. They also act as a focal point for the organisation.

Brands operate differently in business–business markets than in consumer markets, but they share similar qualities and provide similar benefits to the business. This includes driving business volumes and values.

Consumer v business–business markets

So how do business–business markets differ?

- Purchase decisions are not normally down to one person
- The purchase is usually of greater significance
- Product or service attributes can be more varied and therefore key
- The sales process is usually longer
- There are often far more brands to choose from (compare the number of accountants with the number of washing-up liquids)
- Personal relationships are often the determining factors between different offerings

The key success factors in business–business branding

As with all areas of branding there are no ultimate golden rules to building a strong brand. Each sector and business is individual. However some key learning points can be gained from Business Superbrands such as 3M, Lehman Brothers, Ernst & Young and Pfizer.

One such learning may seem obvious but is certainly not widely employed. It is to be bold, and to set out to build a powerful brand even if you do not operate in a sector that traditionally embraces branding. Paper manufacturer Conqueror, print services company Prontaprint, hard goods tool manufacturer Stanley, computer chip manufacturer Intel and even premium stretch fibre Lycra prove that in business–business markets a commitment to building a strong brand can bring dividends. These brands have developed a clear proposition, a quality product and a trust-based relationship with loyal users in primarily commodity-based markets.

A second learning is to ensure that the product or service lives up to, or, better, exceeds, the brand promise, that expectations are met and that each interaction is a pleasant surprise. Whether it is the depth and quality of the consulting provided by Accenture or PriceWaterhouseCoopers or the quality of the editorial analysis in the Economist, the comfort and service on a Virgin Atlantic flight or the PR coverage achieved through Hill & Knowlton, the promise must be delivered.

Another learning is to develop a consistent brand personality and proposition. EasyJet, for example, has developed a strong presence based on a core proposition of value for money without compromising safety and reliability. It has also created a distinct and irreverent personality, not afraid to take on the established competition or inject a little humour. Individuality and personality are prerequisites. Orange, for example, has a refreshing, deep and honest personality built around a colour it now effectively owns.

Authority in service markets is a vital determinant of brand success. However, in both service and non-service business–business markets we found that Business Superbrands tended to immerse themselves fully in their industry, driving new ideas and visionary thinking. Airbus has led the aviation industry in new concepts and technological advancement, Microsoft has led the software industry in user friendly systems and the London Business School continues to produce leading research and entrepreneurs.

Whether through an organisation's Internet site, research, support for industry events, partnerships and associations or even proactive public relations, ensuring that you are visible and that you are perceived to be a leader in your field is fundamental.

While there are many in the business–business world still suffering from 'brand myopia', the early adopters of branding prudence have benefited. They have strengthened their business by being bold enough to be different, by taking the lead and being committed to delivering the brand promise. As such they deserve a pat on the back.

Protect your brands

A new guide on how to protect brands is now available free of charge from the British Brands Group. *A Guide to Brand Protection* explains why brands are worth protecting, the role of intellectual property rights, and what to look out for when reporting fakes in the marketplace. The Guide is available via info@britishbrandsgroup.com or 07020 934250.

