

Building a Brand and Creating Value in a Cluttered World

“Almost half of Americans don’t find brands honest.”¹

“Why consumers don’t trust your brand content and how to fix it.”²

“Almost 70% of consumers don’t trust advertising and 42% distrust brands.”³

There is no doubt headlines such as these are alarming for marketing and advertising professionals to read. There are a growing number of reports and studies that speak to the distrust and confusion consumers feel about brands. Marketers or agency executives, whose job it is to cultivate strong brand relationships, may begin to question their purpose or begin to worry that the age of strong brands is gone. But that is actually far from the truth. While it is indeed an evolving, sometimes scary, marketing world and consumers today are more skeptical and discerning than ever before, that’s exactly why “strong,” relatable brands are more important than ever.

Is Everything Today a Brand?

Skeptical consumers are one thing, but what makes the state of brand building even trickier today is that everything — yes, everything — has become a brand. “Brand” is no longer a term reserved for just goods and services.

Take for example, personal brands. The way someone presents his or herself on LinkedIn, for example, speaks volumes about their professional self. And that personal brand may be very different from how the same individual presents themselves on their Instagram account, which may show a more private side or be curated to reflect a personal interest.

Another example is store brands. Remember the days when “generic” products meant cheap and low quality? The tide has turned. In many cases, choosing the store brand is now a badge of honor, equated to being a smart, savvy shopper.



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These are just two examples of how the word “brand” is being used beyond the expected and now reflects the bigger picture and a more holistic experience.

Building a Differentiated Brand

So in a world where everything is a brand competing for mindshare and there is a common distrust of brands, how do you actually build a successful brand? How do you differentiate your brand, make your brand stick, have your brand story told and heard, and continue to thrive? We propose three critical steps.

First: Know and Love Your Audience.

The most successfully built brands start by having a clear view and understanding of their target audience, with specific attention being paid to their most passionate users. This includes uncovering core insights into the audience’s triggers and behaviors, and what motivates them most. Don’t be afraid to get emotional with your target: the best insights go deeper, even to unspoken levels.

This can sometimes be intimidating territory for pharmaceutical brands that love data and functional benefits. But emotional insights can be far more meaningful. The old “80/20 rule,” where 80% of your business comes from 20% of your audience, can be very useful here. Listening to and connecting with your brand’s loyalists — your 20%, so to speak — is not only good for business because of this group’s buying potential, but also because your most passionate purchasers, writers and/or recommenders can also help you in uncovering ways of reaching and teaching the broader 80%. Whether it’s through research, social listening, or ongoing panel work, successful brands continually tune in to what their audiences have to say about the brand, including the specific language used, in order to help provide guidance for appropriate evolution. Legend has it that a well-known brand’s marketing team would physically drag a cardboard cutout of their target consumer into every meeting so it could serve as a visual reminder of who they were all really working for. Think about it... Who is your cardboard cutout? What do they look like? What do they care about most? What words do they use when they talk about your

brand? What messages are they sharing with their friends and family about your brand — if they are sharing messages at all? How do they express brand love? And of course, how does your brand make their world a better place?

Second: Do Your Homework and Establish Your Foundational Marketing Elements

When was the last time you looked at your positioning statement, your brand's persona, or key strategic documents including your "brand vision" or "brand ambition"? If you're like many marketers, you haven't given these important foundational elements a hard look since launch. Brand building requires ongoing maintenance and check-ins with these elements. In their best form, they provide clear focus with just enough flexibility for marketers to grow a brand to become its very best self. Understanding what you are now is important, but defining what you want your brand to stand for in the future is critical to shaping and directing every decision you make — from product development and packaging decisions, to marketing and customer service decisions. Challenge yourself to clearly state what your brand's purpose and promise are. For example, what are your brand's core pillars and what should it stand for? Also, think about your brand's persona, or personality. If your brand were a person, who would he or she be? What would that person be like, how would they think, look, and act? You then need to stay true to that direction to set your brand up for success.

It's also important not to overlook the tangible elements of your brand's identity to ensure they are still relevant and appropriate for your brand. These include your logo, key colors, tagline, iconography, etc. If these elements align with your brand's promise and your brand ambition, you will be set up for success. If they don't, there will inevitably be a disconnect that can quickly erode confidence, interest and loyalty amongst your audience. Maintaining consistency with these elements is imperative, which is why successful brands develop things like style guides, and ensure everyone associated with marketing and advertising the brand follow the same set of guidelines and parameters. Do you know where your style guide is? When was the last time you looked at it, shared it with your team, and honestly felt confident that its contents reflect your brand's true identity?

Third: Create and Cultivate an Idea


In the marketing industry there exists a magnitude of opinion, rhetoric, and expertise around what you can do to "build a brand" through various tactical strategies. These include suggestions for media channels to generate awareness, new product offerings to promote your brand, and strategies for creating a social media presence. While this type of information is an important part of how we might understand the brand building process and eventually express a brand, it does not reflect an idea in the larger sense. There are many ways to be creative, smart, and innovative about how you express and communicate an idea, and that approach can, in turn, help build your brand — but a brand building idea itself is something different.

To fully understand why this type of big idea is so pivotal to developing a successful brand, let's remind ourselves that brand building is a process that involves creating value for the customer or consumer. While the attributes and unique offerings of your product are a starting point, often brand building is as much about the audience you seek to serve as it is about the product itself. That's why, when you uncover that true insight that gives your product meaning and relevance for the consumer, you know you're on the right track. What comes next is the development of a compelling idea to articulate that product relevance in the context of the human truth or behavioral/attitudinal predisposition that has informed your insight. Bear in mind, the idea itself is not your brand and never will be. Rather, the idea can be an advertising campaign, an innovation platform, a different take on a communication play, etc. But, regardless of the shape it takes, a great idea is fundamental to creating value for your brand.

In the world of advertising we constantly think about ideas and staying true to this broader definition and context. We do this because it is easy to fall victim to the shiny new tactic or engagement channel du jour. Not a week goes by where we aren't exposed to the next great communication offering. From technology innovations to nontraditional partnerships that change the way we think about communications, there is no shortage of thinking within the media and engagement space. As this proliferation of media options and new platforms evolve at a rapid pace, we as marketers and advertisers must, when evaluating

these opportunities, be careful not to choose the shiny new object simply because it feels innovative or because "everyone's doing it." If we look back at some of the strongest brands of the past century, the channels used to communicate their messages may have helped to build their image, but those channels are not what made the brands strong. There is always an idea at the core.

Be a Brand of Value

The health and wellness space at large, and the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical advertising industry specifically, are booming. From traditional television, print and banner ads, to must-have websites and CRM programs, all the way to the innovative arenas of EHR and social media, pharmaceutical manufacturers and marketers are showing no sign of dialing back efforts to create and communicate their brands in order to build market share. The most successful of these brands will be those who remember that building a strong brand — one that can withstand the proliferation of "brands," the evolving media and technology landscape, and growing consumer demands and skepticism — involves creating value that goes far beyond the product or service itself. The most successful brands will be those that find a way to stand out and create connections with consumers, despite these hurdles. It's a challenging task, but one that must be faced head on. There's a good chance your brand competitors know this and are actively working to cultivate strong brand relationships of their own. Shouldn't you be doing so too? 

Editor's notes: ¹ <http://adage.com/article/special-report-4as-conference/mccann-survey-finds-half-america-trust-brand/308544/>; ² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/promisepbelon/2017/01/24/why-consumers-dont-trust-your-brand-content-and-how-to-fix-that/#560ea993425b>; ³ <https://www.marketingweek.com/2017/06/29/arrongance-brand-purpose-distrust-ads/>

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