

Contributed by Mike Myers and Guy Mastrion

AMERICA THE BRAND

A brand is not a color or a single image or a typeface. It is also not a cartoon character, illustration, or icon. While these are all elements of branding, when considered individually, they merely represent a product or service. A brand is a promise — a promise of benefit to your target audience. It goes beyond imagery and words.

Brands provide tangible and intangible benefits to people at an individual level. All of us have driven an extra mile, waited a little longer, or skipped a purchase altogether because we have wanted a specific brand name. Brand-seeking behavior is often the result of a specific product or service becoming part of the fundamental thinking processes.

Well-understood in the world of consumer products, true branding is a relatively misunderstood concept within the pharma industry. Yes, there are exceptions. Many marketers, however, confuse consistency in colors and other graphic elements with true branding efforts.

CONSIDER THE U.S. AS A BRAND AND ITS BRAND PROMISE is freedom. Freedom from religious persecution, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, are a few of the freedoms we enjoy as a nation and as individuals. The flag, the national anthem, our democratic form of government, the movies we create, the sports we enjoy, and the Gods we pray to are all manifestations of the USA's brand promise. But in and of themselves, like colors, graphics, and taglines, they do not fully represent the United States of America.

When our forefathers founded our great nation, whether they realized it or not, they became the master architects of one of the world's greatest, most enduring brands. Their brand continues to thrive and attract more and more customers from around the globe because our forefathers recognized the need for a nation built on freedom. And freedom as a benefit and ideal, in all its forms, has stood the test of time and still fulfills a great need.

Defining the brand promise is the first and most important step in any brand strategy effort. The promise must be the guiding light by which all other aspects of the brand are measured. While easy to understand, it must also convey the intricacies of the product or service at both the tangible and intangible levels. The brand promise is the cornerstone of marketing and communication efforts.

Once the promise is concrete and well-understood, building the overall brand strategy becomes a much more focused task. The brand strategy must support the brand promise, and anything that does not conceptually support the promise and make it more readily believable should be discarded.

As our forefathers sat down to write the constitution, they once again proved themselves expert at the fundamentals of creating a great overall brand strategy. Every idea written into our constitution supports the promise of freedom. Recognized around the world, this promise is so strong and so clear that it resonates with all people whether they admire and respect what the U.S. has to offer or disagree to the point of violence.

GREAT BRANDS NEVER TRY TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE. They strive to clearly and concisely communicate relevant benefits, knowing that this will fulfill a need to a certain market segment. It's natural then that every brand will also have its share of crit-

ics. Marketers too often focus on the one or two dissenters and miss the positive feedback from the more important customers. Changing anything based on this type of approach should only be done with a clear understanding of how these activities will enable marketers to better deliver the brand's promise.

When our nation was founded on the promise of freedom, our forefathers knew their message was not going to attract those who seek to prey on the basic honesty and integrity of most people. Nazism, fascism, totalitarianism, terrorism — the proponents of these brands are not likely to find the U.S.' promise attractive, and many find it threatening.

Once set, defending the brand and its promise is critical to long-term success. Opposition can come from both internal and external groups. It is sometimes necessary to fight painful internal battles to maintain the integrity and clarity of the brand's promise. In the long run, these efforts will make the brand stronger. A great brand never wavers or deviates. A great brand stands the test of time.

WEAK BRANDS NEVER FULFILL THEIR PROMISE, if they ever had one to begin with. They also fail to evolve with the changing nature of their customers and markets. Ultimately this leads to unrealized potential and diminished use over time. A key to overall brand strategy is consistency of promise. It must be supported with features and benefits that provide reasons to believe the promise, and work to have an evolving sense of relevance.

Brand leadership is never easy and requires a great deal of short- and long-term planning. USA, the brand, is triumphant. Triumphant because freedom is as relevant and important today as it was when our forefathers united this nation. True brands like the USA, require vision, focus, and continuity. They require a consistent application of strategy, messaging, and tactics that support the overall promise. When faced with adversity in the quest to make a brand succeed, stand by the promise and its strategic plan. Like the United States with the promise of freedom, if a brand has a relevant promise that is supported through actions, and the product or service live up to that promise, marketers will succeed regardless of the challenges.

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