

# The New Brand Medium

Here is a useful background for both attendees and exhibitors at the Brands Show in New York, May 7-8, at the Hilton New York.

**T**he dictionary defines the term “brand” as “a mark or label of identification, grade, etc. on merchandise; a trademark; hence, the kind or make of a commodity.” In marketing, the meaning goes one step further to include the “reputation” of a company, because a brand has no value unless it is held in high esteem.

Many people associate the term “brand” with consumer products and services, but in fact it applies to any business, from the local deli known for its great sandwiches, to the local plumber who stands out from the others by providing reliable, transparently priced services. In effect, the brand stands for a promise to the customer—a commitment to delivering tangible and intangible specifications of needs or desires. The brand has value when people can recall it well enough to refer the company to a friend or colleague.

The most desirable brands have so much value, other companies want to associate themselves with them, either by offering a brand as an incentive, recognition, or reward, or in some form of co-marketing program in which companies work together to reinforce each other’s brands.

## The Role of People

Advertising and marketing agencies would like us to believe that a brand can be created through marketing—an effective

logo, great advertising campaign, and clever promotions—and indeed these techniques play an important role. Product and service creators would have us believe that it’s the product or service that truly defines the brand, such as a great line of highly reliable automobiles appropriately priced and designed with features that appeal to its target audience, or an overnight delivery company that reliably delivers when it says it will. Again, no one can argue with that. But, in their never-ending focus on processes, organizations leave out one other critical component of a great brand, the people who deliver its promises.

People contribute to brands every step of the way. It starts with customers who become loyal and so convinced about the quality of the brand, they tell their friends or business colleagues. Many business people will tell you that much of their business comes via word-of-mouth, and it’s only natural. Finding high quality products and vendors is a never-ending quest, and people regularly help one another by sharing good resources.

Salespeople, of course, make a major contribution to the brand, sometimes negatively, often positively. Effective advertising often draws people into retail showrooms only to encounter indifferent or uninformed salespeople whose behavior and service run completely counter to the promises implied. On the other hand, customer-focused salespeople eager to

find solutions for customers can have so much power, they may negate the need for much advertising at all. Take Mary Kay Cosmetics, which virtually built its business without advertising, or, much more recently, YouTube. When people like something, they tell their friends.

Equally important: channel partners. Every insurance, financial services, or manufacturer that sells through brokers, distributors, retailers, etc., daily confronts the challenge of having channel partner salespeople who can deliver the promises made in advertising. Billions get spent on marketing, training, and incentive programs to somehow move the needle with the millions of salespeople representing multiple lines, who are themselves overwhelmed by efforts to get their attention.

No less critical: employees. From the people who answer the phone, or the automated systems often standing in their way, to the janitor on the shop floor whose failure to properly clean something could yield a product defect in multiple products, employees may contribute as much as anyone to how people perceive our brands.

Some organizations get it, including such companies as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Ritz-Carlton, and Nordson Corp., this year’s winner of the Performance Through People Award given by the Forum for People Performance Management and Measurement.

## The Power of Your Brand

Why should you care about your brand? Because better brands, that is, better reputations, make our business lives easier. Because happy customers beget

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repeat purchases and new customers, who in turn beget more repeat purchases and more new customers. Satisfying customers means we can spend less time and money looking for new customers and more time focusing on coming up with more great products and better ways to make customers happy.

The tool kit for building great brands through people exists and is well documented by the Forum for People Performance Management's conference held recently at The Motivation Show in Chicago. The proceedings indicate that there are several good reasons why companies neglect the connection between brands and people: it's a challenge. Fostering this type of focus on the brand requires a focus on customers and people alien to the process orientation of many CEOs, and requires a breakdown of organizational silos that represents a major challenge in the best of circumstances. Aligning the actions of people across an organization is far more complicated than aligning the actions of a machine or business process. To tackle this challenge takes inspired leadership starting at the top and fostered throughout the entire organization. Only those CEOs who see the connection to financial results have the stomach for the task.

Go to <http://www.performanceforum.org>: and click on "Seminars", then "Proceedings", to find out why this subject is gradually gaining ground and what's involved in taking your brand to the next level through the power of people. You will find that a lack of information or economic evidence are no excuse for overlooking the people part of the brand equation. The real obstacle: the fact that many CEO's still don't get the financial connection between engaged workers, satisfied customers, and financial results.

### Brands as Media

Almost any organization can leverage the power of other brands to make a statement about their own brand, draw attention to their external or internal marketing messages, motivate opt-in to receive communications, refer new customers, or make repeat purchases, or motivate channel partners and employees to perform, etc. By appealing to

specific demographics, brands make a statement that resonates with specific target audiences. Brands can enhance the perceived value of an award, and help draw attention to whatever message you're trying to get across.

Brands can also be used in cooperative or joint promotions, in which two or more organizations leverage each other's brands for mutual benefit. These applications can include affinity programs in which one brand offers discounts to customers of other brands; loyalty programs in which select brands provide rewards for mutual customers; sweepstakes, contests or charitable promotions in which complimentary brands participate in order to boost marketing resources, appeal and impact.

Specialized incentive and marketing companies have expertise using brands as promotions, incentives, rewards, and recognition, or in co-marketing programs. And can offer the complete range of services necessary to profit from the new Brand medium.

### Other Brand Extensions

Many companies extend their brand through promotional products, a powerful strategy too often taken lightly. Selected properly, a promotional product can enhance a brand and make it part of someone's home or office life. Selected poorly, a promotional product ends up in a trash basket or desk drawer. Promotional products consultants help companies find the right products, for the correct audience, at the right price.

Is your brand an incentive? The most powerful, desirable brands not only have appeal in their marketplaces, but are so desirable other companies want to use them in their incentive, promotions, or rewards and recognition system. Being able to sell your brand into this marketplace is a rare mark of distinction, since it means that your product or service not only is desirable, it motivates. Such companies comprise the exhibitors at The New York Incentive, Rewards and Recognition Show.

### Where to Go From Here

You can take a fresh look at your organization's brand from your customer's perspective. Try to identify the key unique

selling benefits your marketing messages or sales force convey and realistically assess if your organization consistently delivers it. Conduct a survey of your employees to find out if they are even aware of what your marketing and sales campaigns promise, or how what they do can have an impact on the perception of that brand. Determine if you have taken advantage of all of the word of mouth opportunities that can arise in the Internet age to get customers or employees to spread the word.

You can step back and look at your marketing, to either consumers, salespeople, channel partners and employees, and assess to what extent you really have broken through the communications clutter with customers, channel partners, and employees. Have they engaged? Do they get it? Does your marketing engage people to sign up to receive ongoing communications from you on a permission basis? Do a reasonable percentage read and respond? Marketing campaigns that include brands as prizes, rewards, or promotions can resonate with your target audience, improve perceived value, create buzz, help you stand out from the crowd, and make a statement about your company's own brand. Brands make for an important weapon in the arsenal of any type of communications or engagement effort with almost type of audience.

You can look at your own brand as a marketing tool. You spend a considerable sum on advertising, direct marketing, trade shows, or even salespeople, to get more business; have you considered all of the highly targeted ways to get your brand in front of the customer, even when your salespeople cannot—i.e., through a strategically selected promotional product?

And, the ultimate opportunity: can your brand itself be an incentive for other companies to use in their arsenals? Those honors go to the exhibitors at The New York Incentive, Rewards and Recognition Expo.

For more information on the market, read "Profiting from the Corporate Market for Incentives and Promotional Products" under the Incentives information mall of the Sales Marketing Network at [Info-now.com](http://Info-now.com).