

Brand Building – Not Bland Building

Ever heard of a brand that rejects customers? Probably not. Brands are uniformly desperate to attract them. So why would a brand take the opposite approach?

Some years ago, I developed the concept for the Pepsi Web site's relaunch. I was challenged by the big question, how do you create a Web site for promoting sticky soda? The site had to be cool and relevant; it had to make visitors drink more soda than they already did. Given Pepsi's prominence, the task might appear easy. Yet without abusing the usual solutions, such as games, screensavers, and music news, it wasn't. Those hackneyed techniques were, even back then, so overdone they weren't suited to brand building unless the brand was in the gaming or music industries.

The solution was extracted from a simple proposition: Kids love challenges. It became the basis for a highly unusual approach that aimed to reject Pepsi site visitors rather than embrace them.

To enter the site, visitors were required to pass an intelligence test. If their answers weren't clever enough, quick enough, or simply correct, the site rejected them. If visitors succeeded in getting in, there were prizes. First prize was... a trip into outer space! Yes, a real one, shared by six lucky people.

The assignment taught me reverse marketing isn't such a bad thing. Thousands of kids tried to enter the site every day. And thousands of rejected visitors spread rumours about "backdoors" into the site that allowed users to bypass the test.

The site was an instant hit.

The "Pepsi challenge" was turned on its head. Suddenly, it was directed at the brand's customers instead of its competitors. Probably for the first time in corporate brand history, the challenge defeated and rejected most aspiring visitors.

The key to the site's success was that its operation was based on truth. If visitors did well on the tests, the site slowly rewarded them. If entrants failed the test, the site wouldn't pander to them with second chances or using a near-enough-is-good-enough approach. It would be direct and truthful in its appraisal and kick them out.

Truth and directness have an advantage over politically correct indirectness. Often, branding that rejects political correctness not only catches audience attention, but also creates loyal customers. No one is politically correct all the time. Now and then, slivers of our personalities expose themselves in our laughter or debate.

Unfortunately, corporate branding has reached a point where it's desperately afraid of telling the truth, of revealing opinions that might exhibit personality and attitude.

Human beings are all about attitude and opinion. You can't converse with someone with no opinions or who agrees with you to avoid heated discussion. That's not conversation at all. Attitude will characterize branding's future. Branding will escape blandness. It will jump off the fence it's been sitting on to reveal opinions on home pages, in advertising, and in broadcasting.

It won't be easy. Most corporate decision-making is "committed" into blandness. Branding opinions are corrected out of existence, bringing only inoffensive and politically correct campaigns to the public's jaded gaze.

Branding is about creating strong brand personalities that are identifiable, memorable, and recognizable for life. Branding should engage a viewer; converse with customers; provoke scrutiny. With no opinions, there are no conversations. Reject the rules that have been



rejecting your brand's recourse to opinion. Let your brand establish its identity, strut its attitude, and show its own personality.

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