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How Solid Is Your Brand?

Our columnist details the six key characteristics a well-positioned brand needs to possess

by [Steve McKee](#)

It's hard to read a business book or magazine these days without some mention of branding. It's a hot topic, and there are about as many definitions of branding as there are people claiming to be experts. Yet although the words may be different, every definition boils down to essentially the same thing: A brand is what represents a company, product, and/or service in the marketplace. It's a shortcut that enables prospective customers to understand more rapidly and readily trust what you're selling.

But what distinguishes a good brand from a bad one? How do you know if your brand is strong or weak? And as you develop new brands or marketing efforts for existing brands, how can you know that you're on the right track with your positioning?

There are many characteristics that define solid brands, but I'd like to offer what I call the Big Six. See how your brand stacks up against them.

Relevance. This is requirement No.1. If a brand isn't relevant, it might as well be invisible. Altoids ([WWY](#)) is "the curiously strong mint," a germane positioning for those times when someone has bad breath. FedEx ([FDX](#)) promises your package will "absolutely, positively" be there overnight, a highly relevant promise to people who are shipping important documents.

You might think it makes sense for automakers to make cars that will appeal to the largest market segments possible. But when GM's ([GM](#)) [Bob Lutz](#) was at [Chrysler](#) in the 1990s, he knew that market relevance was more important than market size. Under his leadership, Chrysler resurrected its brand with narrowly targeted hits such as the Dodge Ram, the Jeep Grand Cherokee, the Chrysler PT Cruiser, and the impractical (but totally cool) Dodge Viper—vehicles that intentionally don't appeal to everyone but were highly relevant to their core target audiences.

Which brings up an important point: What's relevant for one group of customers may be irrelevant to another. Just one company, Procter & Gamble ([PG](#)), in one category (detergents) leverages four different points of relevance: superior cleaning (Tide), fragrance (Gain), color protection (Cheer), and stain fighting (ERA). If your brand isn't the category leader, don't try to seize the leader's positioning. (Would you really take on Tide in superior cleaning?) Instead, look for an alternate feature or benefit on which you can win with a defined market segment.

And remember that relevance is a continually moving target. [William Lauder](#), CEO of cosmetics manufacturer Estée Lauder ([EL](#)), says: "The challenge for any brand marketer is how to continue to maintain a modernity or contemporaneous look to your brand while not changing it so much that a loyal consumer says, 'It's not my brand anymore.' It's quite a challenge. Many of the great brands out there have been hurt by being too committed to history and not committed enough to what history offers as an instruction to the future."

Simplicity. In his book *The World is Flat*, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman says: "There is nothing wrong with complicated ideas, but if you want to convey a complicated thought to a mass audience, you have to first condense it into something digestible and believable. Once you grab someone's attention, you can pour in the details." He may have been referring to political events and global business trends, but the principle holds true in any form of communication.

No doubt there are many things about your product or service that you want people to know. But it's a lot to ask of a consumer to allow you to educate them about your brand. Subaru ([FUJHF](#)) has always made good automobiles, with solid engineering, nice styling, and reasonable gas mileage. But a couple of decades ago, Subaru was about to go extinct in the U.S. for lack of consumer appeal. The company was saved by focusing on one thing: the beauty of all-wheel-drive. It led people who never would have considered a Subaru to give the brand a look, and many of them became brand loyalists.

Think of your product as a beautifully decorated home. Of course it's something you're proud of, and you'd like to invite people to come in so they can look around, be impressed, and spend some time there. Your positioning is simply the door to that home, the point of entry through which people must choose to pass. Most homes have more than one door, but you have to pick one that will serve as the primary point of entry.

Ad great Bill Bernbach said: "Find the simple story in the product, and present it in an articulate and intelligent, persuasive way." Voltaire was even more succinct: "The best way to be boring is to leave nothing out."

Differentiation. Having a simple and relevant message is vital, but if your competitors are saying the same thing you'll have to outspend them to make any progress. That's why words like "quality" and "service" don't work anymore; so many companies have made the claims that the [words themselves have become empty vessels](#) (BusinessWeek, 6/7/06)

You can differentiate based on any number of things, from features to packaging to price. Maker's Mark ([FO](#)) doesn't brag about great taste; instead, it wants you to know that its bourbon "is handmade every step of the way." Absolut became one of the most famous branding case studies ever by celebrating the shape of its vodka bottle. And Target ([TGT](#)) achieved what *Advertising Age* called "the ultimate retail positioning" by crafting an image that transcends simple description.

Keep in mind, however, that differentiation, like relevance, is a moving target. The more success you have, the more your competitors will try to claim the ground you've staked. There was a time when CNN ([TWX](#)) was the only cable news network, and it developed a loyal following that kept it on top for years. But its success attracted copycats, and now CNN has lost its leadership position. Miller Lite ([SBMRF](#)) was the first beer to combine "tastes great" and "less filling." But today there are dozens of light beers, and Miller Lite is struggling to find its place.

We have a mantra that we live by in our advertising practice: Don't be better, be different. If you're still claiming that your brand is better than its competitors, you have a differentiation problem. It's more advantageous to be the only one that does what you do than one of many trying to outdo each other.

Believability. Your positioning can be too much of a stretch, no matter how relevant, simple, and differentiated it is. In 1998, GMC researched the idea of adding a big, bold vehicle to its product lineup. It didn't do well. But according to the brand's general manager, when the same vehicle was branded with a different name, it "blew the doors off." The new brand? Hummer. Despite its huge consumer appeal the vehicle wasn't a good fit under the GMC brand.

Years ago, Burger King ([BKC](#)) tested steak dinners with table service at some of its restaurants. Simple? Sure. Relevant? Certainly. Differentiating? You bet. But it was hard to believe that a fast-food joint could do a good job serving expensive dinners, and Burger King wisely abandoned the idea. McDonald's ([MCD](#)) tried to sell pizza a few years back and found that it, too, was too much of a stretch for the brand. Now, Subway and [Dunkin' Donuts](#) are also in the pizza game. We'll see how

long it lasts.

Believability is one of the problems of pursuing a line extension strategy. A brand that works great in one category doesn't necessarily work in others. Sometimes you can stretch a brand so thin that it rips.

Credibility. Credibility is believability's close cousin. Whatever promise you make has to be consistently delivered upon or it will flop, no matter how strong the positioning. Last week, I stayed at a big hotel chain that trumpets its new slogan with great pride: "Be Hospitable." Yet when I called the front desk to request a late checkout because of a meeting I was attending in their conference center, I had to argue with the clerk to get just one additional hour. What do you think I'm going to remember every time I see their ads? An empty promise.

Listen to what Jim McDowell, vice-president for marketing at BMW North America ([BYMOF](#)), says about the credibility of his brand. "There's nothing more important than the brand and what the brand stands for. Everything we do is about strengthening the brand. For 25 years we haven't changed who we are or what our tagline is. A BMW is the 'Ultimate Driving Machine.' We've interpreted it in different ways and demonstrated it through different models, but that fundamental idea has never varied. If you want to be really vivid with precise edges in the marketplace, you have to have the discipline to prune away relentlessly all the things that you're not. Few marketers have this discipline. We can all name the ones who do. And their brands are famous, trusted, and reliable."

Defensibility. Finally, even if your positioning passes all of the above tests, it won't do any good if a bigger competitor can swoop in and take it from you. That's why it's so important to focus on a narrow position and seize it with everything you've got. The longer and more effectively you have established your brand's positioning, the harder it will be for someone to mimic or co-opt it.

Gatorade ([PEP](#)) has been able to maintain a commanding market share of as much as 80% despite the best efforts of its competitors. Gatorade was first in the category, relentlessly pursued its positioning as "the athlete's thirst quencher," and built a franchise in consumers' minds.

The strongest brands are those that find ways to stay relevant, simple, different, believable, credible, and defensible. If your brand is weak in one or more of the six characteristics, take steps to address it now. And if it's strong, keep an eye out for the shifting sands on which all brands stand. If there's one thing that's certain about branding, it's that change is constant.

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