**10 Attributes of a Great Brand**

Branding is a hot subject these days in the marketing business.

What I want to do is give you some specifics on what I think this whole discussion has lacked. Specifics of what makes a great brand.

**1. It tends to be first.**

The first thing that many great brands tend to be is “first.” While the business world buzzes about quality, the real success stories are the ones that are first.

McDonald’s became the first high-speed hamburger. Coke, the first cola. Coke can lay claim to being the “Real Thing” because of the fact that they were indeed the founder of colas. The first champagne, Dom Perignon. It’s also the only champagne that most everybody knows by name. The Club is a modern day first that started a whole new industry.

**2. It gets into the mind.**

Unfortunately a lot of companies come up with some terrific ideas but they never get anywhere because they don’t get into the mind. Eventually somebody else shows up in the category and gets credit for being first. That’s what “Positioning” is all about.

Take the classic battle, many years ago, between IBM and Univac in computers. Univac was out ahead of IBM. But the organization that really took over the minds in the marketplace was IBM. While they really weren’t first, most people now think they were first.

You can come up with an interesting idea, but if your bigger competitors get a jump on it before you get a chance to establish it in people’s minds, you lose.

**3. It owns a word.**

The most powerful brands tend to own a word in the mind.

Crest owns “cavities.” Thirty-five years of “Look ma, no cavities.”

BMW owns “driving.”

Volvo owns “safety.” What makes this work is the fact that a Volvo looks like a tank.

Domino’s owns two words: “Home delivery.”

**4. It stays focused.**

Great brands stay focused on their words or concepts. What they don’t want to do is start to fuzz up their identity. When they do, bad things happen.

Chevrolet used to be a great family car. But over the years they added endless models and types. Today a Chevrolet is a small, big, cheap, expensive, car, sports car, truck. It’s no wonder that Ford is the No. 1 selling brand of car.

**5. It avoids line extension.**

This is the most elusive attribute in Corporate America. Once a big brand name is built up, there is an irresistible pressure to “extend the equity of the brand.” Soon you have an endless variety of varieties and different products hung on the brand.

Consider the story of Scott Tissue, once America’s No. 1 brand of toilet tissue. Then, over a twenty-year period of time, they introduced Scottkins, Scott Towels, Scotties. No longer could I write “Scott” on a shopping list and have it mean anything. Then along came Mr. Whipple and those tissue squeezers from Charmin. They took away a lot of Scott’s tissue business. Today, Charmin is the No. 1 tissue.

Budweiser used to be just one brand and the King of Beer. Now it’s Bud Light, Bud Dry, Bud Ice. It’s no wonder Budweiser sales are declining.

Line extension is a great strategy in the boardroom. It’s a lousy strategy in the minds of our prospects.

**6. It doesn’t change.**

The most powerful brands don’t change. The ones that come and go are like shooting stars.

The airline People’s Express was a shooting airline. They had a great concept: small airline, small prices, small markets. They took off like a rocket. Then, flush with success, they introduced big airlines, flew to the big markets and started to fly “business class.” They’re gone today. And who succeeded them? Southwest Airlines, who are doing very nicely, thank you.

Our hero is the White Castle hamburger chain. In 1930, they were selling those greasy little sliders. Today, little has changed in the building or the menu and they’re still selling those greasy little sliders.

How are they doing? Just fine. On a sales per unit basis McDonald’s does 1.6 million. White Castle does 1.2 million. Burger King does 1.0 million.

**7. It’s very competitive.**

Another attribute of a good brand is that it tends to be very competitive. Strong, tough brands are always out there looking to beat up on their competition. They don’t just sit there. If you are going to take some of their business, it’s going to be very difficult.

Consider MCI beating up on AT&T. Not only did AT&T attack MCI’s numbers with “MCI Math VS. True Math,” they also made fun of those MCI telemarketing calls “Bye Bye MCI.”

And of course there’s Hertz beating up on its challengers with “There’s Hertz and not exactly.”

**8. It has a good name.**

Another attribute of a great brand is the name. Most great brands have good names. They also have names that verbally connect to their positioning strategies.

Cottonelle. It’s not cotton, but it’s cottony and soft.

Dial. Round-the-clock protection.

Taster’s Choice. Tastes and smells like the ground roast coffee.

Toys R Us. You need say no more.

**9. It’s careful about "tomorrow."**

Another attribute is a sensitivity about tomorrow. In other words, there are times when the marketplace changes and you have to be careful about what to do with your brand. It could be a new generation of product or a new technology.

Consider the battery business. The business moved from zinc carbon to alkaline. Eveready, the big brand in batteries, tried to take its Eveready zinc carbon brand over to alkaline. But they fell in the trench between today and tomorrow. Duracell preempted the alkaline category with a brilliant name. By the time Eveready started a new brand, Energizer, it was too late. Their leadership was lost.

**10. It keeps going and going.**

And finally, the last attribute of a good brand: It keeps going and going.

The biggest brands have been around a long, long time. People don’t realize this. If you look at a 1923 list of brands they will look familiar. It’s no wonder as most are the leaders of today. (Kodak, Kellogg’s, Coca-Cola, Goodyear, etc.) It also shows you the power of being first. Which brings us full circle on the attributes of a great brand.