

The path to a brand's meaningful reputation

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Brand & Reputation

The concepts of “brand” and “reputation” are often seen as one and the same. However, when viewed separately, significant opportunities arise to improve both.

The road to successful branding has never been more complex or challenging. What started, as a one-way lane going directly from the manufacturer’s door to the buyer’s door is now an ever-expanding, two-way, multi-lane super-highway with intersections, tollbooths, and rest stops.

During this evolution, the meaning of the word “brand” has become very broad. It has come to mean everything from a trademark to what amounts to being an all-encompassing and nearly religious experience. Today consumers, consultants, retailers, wholesalers, direct sellers, CEOs, CFOs and CMOs use the word to mean different things depending on their perspectives on, orientation to, and knowledge of, the branding discipline.

For many, there is no distinct line between the meaning of a “brand” and its “reputation”. However, by intentionally creating a line between the two, at a point where one can presume one ends and the other begins, one starts to see clearly how a “brand” drives its ‘reputation’. At the same time one also sees how the unique mechanics of reputation building, viewed in isolation, hold clues as to how that “cause and effect” works and shows the steps one can take to enhance its power.

The key lies in why—and, more importantly, how—things get remembered.



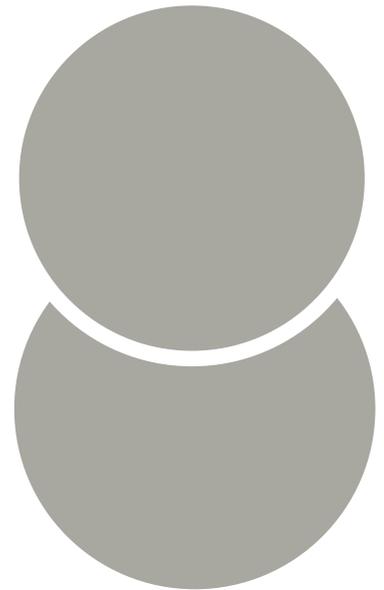
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A useful dividing line

Before exploring the mechanics of reputation building, it is important to define a point at which it can be said 'brand' ends and 'reputation' starts. Perhaps the simplest and most useful division between the two is based on control. The business behind a brand invests tremendous amounts of capital and human energy to create products or services, distribution methods and pricing and promotion. These are important variables over which the business normally have great degrees of control.

However, the same business loses control once its efforts enter both the public and individual domains. It is at this point when—beyond the control of the business—everything the business does with its brand is interpreted by individuals, social groups, and the media. This process of interpretation puts the brand into the broader context of social and individual life (answering questions such as “What’s in it for me?” “is it cool?” “Can I afford it?” “How will I feel owning it”, etc.). It is this individualized interpretation, which is then internalized. Individuals retain memories that differ from what the business has communicated through its branding efforts. They remember what remains when the brand has been put through the personal and social filters of values, beliefs, needs, customs, morality, and so on.

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What, and
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-Maya Angelou

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

A helpful way to understand what and how people remember things is to answer this question: “Name a person or brand that has made you very angry.” The first thing to notice are the feelings that come up immediately—there’s a pureness to the emotions. Next, consciousness will conjure up an image of the errant person or brand and the damaging situation. Slowly, the story will take shape as more and more details flood the conscious mind. If asked about the feelings that have emerged, it is likely the conscious mind will take over and provide rationalizations and justifications for the anger in the compelling language of a defense attorney.

The point of this illustration is to focus attention on the anchor point of the memory: core emotions. In this case, we’ve dealt with strong negative emotions: anger and resentment. However, by turning the story around and asking, “Name a person or brand that has made you feel really secure” one can see by that positive memories start and work in the same way.

The memory in this case would initiate warm and secure feelings at the start, from which would flow the story, its details and then the subsequent presentation of rationalization and justification for the emotions.

The dominant role of emotions in the way people remember—and therefore how reputations are built—is summed up in a quote from the poet Maya Angelou; “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” But, as seen in the above examples one doesn’t necessarily totally forget what’s been said or done. These “rational facts” are stored alongside strong and significant memories. Indeed, the biggest fans of individuals or brands will always be prepared to give ‘testimony’ through fact-laden, highly detailed, and passionately presented stories.

It is debatable whether people remember every interaction experience they have in the course of a day, a week, or a lifetime. But clearly, particularly in today's media intensive environment, people have learned to relegate banal experiences to the deep, dark recesses of the mind (e.g. this morning's trip to the ATM) while giving priority—and “top-of-mind awareness”—to experiences they have found significant and meaningful. Just as a brand helps us quickly buy our preferred coffee (without having to look at, evaluate, and consider all the options on offer), people have found ways to navigate the world based on their emotional preferences and needs. They seek out, and respond to, emotional connections that give added meaning to their otherwise crowded and demanding lives.

It is important to acknowledge that this thinking does not always lead to a ‘happy, happy, happy’ relationship between brands and the people vital to their success. In some cases this may be emotional nature of the relationship (e.g. an amusement park), but for many others the emotions may be far more subtle, down-to-earth and mature (e.g. an engineering firm). The point is, the amusement park isn't only about the emotional connection—they may also make price deals. And the engineering firm isn't only about the rational connection—they may chose to bond with their customers through a thought leadership program.

The lesson from this is that the more relevant, significant and meaningful a brand's remembered experiences are, the stronger the brand's emotional anchor will be (as well as the deeper the well of kept story-telling facts and information). Businesses that work to ensure that their branding efforts have strong emotionally anchored content will build stronger, more resilient, and more powerful reputations for their brands.

Emotional anchors carve out a manageable ‘emotional space’

Many businesses have been successful over time without paying particular attention to the emotional nature of their reputations. If things were going well, it was assumed the business had a “good” reputation. But today, with the changing ways in which businesses compete, consumers consume and technology evolves it is clearly time for businesses to make the shift from simply having a ‘good’ reputation to prospering over time through a ‘meaningful reputation’.

A reputation is meaningful when it is built upon particularly significant, relevant, and emotionally meaningful interactions. The continuing accumulation of interactions over time helps support, reinforce, and expand the reputation.

The task therefore is to populate the business’s interactions with specific emotional anchors, which seen together can be said to comprise the brand’s ‘emotional space’. There is a pool of some 300 positive emotions from which businesses can choose the three or four, which they can use to define the emotional space their brand seeks to occupy.

The different emotional anchors selected typically reflect different dimensions of the relationship between the brand and the people vital to its success.

After all, few meaningful relationships are based upon a single emotion. Emotional anchors may link to different aspects of the purchase experience, for example, how it feels to buy the product or service, how it feels to deal with the company after the sale, how it feels to own the product or service and, perhaps, how it feels to let others know the product or service has been acquired.

Blended with the brand’s unique characteristics, the emotional space creates a highly differentiated and emotionally captivating story for the brand.

Creating more meaningful interactions

Whether a business seeks to create, shift, or improve their reputation, the starting point is to assess all the ways the business interacts with the people vital to its success, from customers to prospects to partners to suppliers to employees (present and future). Then it is matter of choosing those interaction opportunities that have the greatest possibility to embrace people emotionally.

Every interaction is composed of four variables, each of which the business can reshape in light of its emotional space:

1

Aesthetics—essentially, the ‘look and feel’ of the interaction. Design is the most powerful tool to establish emotional space (based on three or four chosen emotional anchors). From first impressions to the ongoing role of maintaining the brand’s emotional integrity, design is a critical factor in the success of building and creating a meaningful reputation.

2

Discourse—this is both the dialog and the tone of voice. Content creates the rational story; tone of voice adds an important emotional dimension.

3

Functionality—this is the way the interaction literally works. For example, based on a desired emotional space definition, a business may choose to streamline, simplify, or eliminate process steps to generate greater emotional bonding.

4

Associations—these can be either metaphorical (e.g. linked to a lifestyle) or literal (e.g. linked to another brand or social cause) with the aim of underscoring the brand’s emotional space.

A practical way forward:

1) define the brand's desired emotional space; 2) choose the business's most emotionally potent interactions, and 3) inject the desired emotional space into those interactions by considering how aesthetics, discourse, functionality and associations can be fine-tuned to spark specific emotional responses.

Over time, a truly competitive business will spread this thinking to virtually all its customer, partner, supplier, and employee interactions. This will help create a seamless emotionally led reputation. Indeed, the most advanced businesses will strive to create new modes of interaction based solely on the brand's desired emotional space. In this sense, the emotional space becomes an integral part of the business's mission.

A brand's chosen emotional space defines how the business would like each person vital to their success to feel when they think of, encounter, and talk about their brand.

Conclusion

By seeing ‘brand’ and ‘reputation’ as separate entities, a business can take important steps to improve both. The mechanics of reputation—the emotional anchors and their vital role in memory—show how a business can set emotional goals for its brand and the steps it can take to achieve them.

This approach to ‘reputation-based branding’ leads to more meaningful interactions between a brand and the people vital to its success. The greater meaning conveyed through each emotionally led interaction leads to more profoundly positive memories which, in turn, results in a stronger, more resilient and more enduring reputation. And as with all successful brand-building efforts, businesses realize these tangible returns on investment:

A compelling competitive edge, powered by emotion as uniquely manifest with the brand

Powerful differentiation; lifts brands from ‘good enough’ to ‘must have’

Increased sales because of greater awareness and increased desire

Increased customer loyalty and advocacy

Brand inoculation—stronger brand affinity counters negative events

Those searching for ways to prevail in today’s dynamic marketplace would do well to seize the power of reputation-based branding.



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