



Speak to Objectives

Catchy Isn't Enough

Most companies do not hesitate to invest time and resources in product development, yet they often shortchange verbal branding efforts, based on the false assumption that “it doesn't matter what the name says, it just has to be catchy.” Alas, possessing a memorable name does not necessarily equal being well understood and properly appreciated.

One lesson to be drawn from the early demise of many promising dotcom companies is that quickly achieving high name recognition is not the same as possessing a meaningful brand that can go the distance. For every Yahoo still trading on a strong brand image, a host of companies with equally “catchy” names have disappeared into the dotcom abyss.

Giving undue weight to the catchiness factor, at the expense of your strategic purpose, means important branding and marketing opportunities will be lost. A catchy name or tagline can indeed serve to get the attention of your target audience, but once their attention is secured, a successful brand-building effort will require verbal branding solutions that clearly and consistently communicate the right message to all audiences.

Strategic Purpose Is Preeminent

At the inception of any verbal branding effort, you must first stand back and ask yourself, “Exactly what needs to be accomplished with this new (name/tagline/product naming system)?” The answer to this question provides a basis for defining the strategic branding objectives that should drive the endeavor and for establishing relevant criteria against which to evaluate alternate verbal branding solutions.

To establish this strategic framework, the most important thing to keep in mind is that all successful branding efforts are externally focused. You must keep your target audience's needs in plain sight, and be able to delineate what it is they need to know and understand about your brand, in order for you to achieve your strategic purpose.

Sometimes the shift from internal to external perspective can be more difficult than it sounds. When you're ensconced inside the belly of the beast, it's tempting to assume that its species and nature can be readily understood by all others. Branding exploration exercises like the following can help you make this critical shift, reach consensus about what will need to be communicated in order to advance your business goals, and ensure that verbal branding solutions speak to the target audience in a relevant, credible, and compelling manner.

Staking Out a Brand Position

If your company is considering a corporate name change, your first step should be to clarify the company's positioning, and determine what it is that most essentially must be understood about your brand, and by whom. Most companies have several audiences that need to be considered. Identify and characterize your audiences, prioritize them, then select the most important. You will want to list for each audience what, specifically, that audience needs to know and understand about the brand for your company to succeed.



“What the audience needs to know and understand” begins with a global purpose, or high-level brand message (we are/we provide), and specific benefit messages, both functional (our technology works cross-platform) and emotional (you won’t feel hampered by your hardware). Stand back and evaluate the separate lists you’ve created as objectively as possible. Note what messages are common to all key audiences, then identify the most important messages to be communicated overall. These will become your key brand messages.

It is also important at this point to consider what kind of image you want to associate with your brand, in order to give your audiences a reason to prefer your offering to other similar offerings. Strategically, is it key that the company be perceived to be visionary – leading the way in an emerging field – or a tried and true expert, building on success?

Clarification of the most desirable image attributes will allow you not only to suggest an advantage over competitors, but will also enable you to establish parameters for how key messages should be expressed verbally and visually, and help you set a standard for corporate behavior.

The Competitive Context

How your company expresses itself verbally will not be understood in isolation, but in its competitive context. As you begin to define your objectives, carefully scrutinize the competitive landscape. Examine the names being used by your most significant competitors and objectively evaluate the messages they convey. How do these messages compare to those you have identified as being critical to convey to your target audiences? What ideas have been appropriated by your competitors and are best avoided? Where might there be an opportunity to say something fresh and compelling?

Similarly, assess the imagery that has been employed by your competitors. What image attributes are they promoting through their use of language, tone of voice, graphic design, the style of their advertising? What stance is being taken? What attitude, both toward the offer and toward the audience, is being expressed?

Within this competitive context, what key brand messages and image attributes will honestly, positively, and appropriately distinguish your company from the competition?

Personality Sets Us Apart

Our personalities are a primary differentiator. Throughout the course of our lifetimes, we meet thousands of people, but the ones with engaging personalities are the ones we are likely to remember. To establish a brand that people recognize and appreciate, you need to create and express an engaging, and honest, corporate personality.

In the marketplace, functional and emotional benefits, along with core competencies, are easily replicated. Personality is constant, and yet adaptable to changes in business pursuits. A clearly defined brand personality will help you solidify your competitive positioning, enhance the perceived value of your offering, and imbue all that you do with uniqueness.

To illuminate your corporate brand personality, it can be useful to imagine the company as an actual person, interacting as that person would with customers and competitors. List the personality traits that positively set your company apart from the competition along with those that support the key audience messages you’ve identified. Is your company conservative or flamboyant? Authoritative or supportive? Passionate or dispassionate?



Identify the most striking personality traits – the genuine hallmarks of your organization – which will support the key audience messages and benefits, be fully appreciated by your target audience, and remain competitively distinctive. Consider whether your company can own these personality traits and if they honestly fit with your corporate culture. After all, there is no point in posing as an “adventurous” company when the real management style is cautious and conservative. We all know how off-putting a fake personality can be, so be honest.

Core Brand Attributes

By conducting brand exploration exercises like those described above, your management team should be in a position to assess the ideas that have been put forward about what the audience needs to understand about your brand – global purpose, benefits, desired image associations, and unique personality traits.

You’ll likely be starting with a laundry list of brand messages, image associations, and characteristics which can be overwhelming. To move from such a laundry list to a determination of core brand attributes, it’s often helpful to sort the list into four categories: organizational attributes, behavioral attributes, personality traits, and tenets.

Organizational attributes are those that define what the company does now and may do in the future. Take as an example The Ocean Conservancy, which is in the business of *advocating* to protect the world’s oceans. Behavioral attributes are those that reflect how the organization does what it does – in this case, proactively and persuasively. Personality traits reflect the organization’s unique approach to what it does – a visionary stance, with an inspirational style of operation, a bold attitude. Tenets (*lives depend on wild, healthy oceans*) express those beliefs that motivate action and lie at the heart of all corporate endeavors.

It should become clear through this exercise that there are certain hallmarks of your brand that derive from a combination of organizational and behavioral attributes, personality traits, and tenets. Some will be more extraneous and less enduring than others. In the end, your core brand attributes will consist of a subset of the most essential and, importantly, most permanent of these hallmarks. These are the attributes which will not change over time or with changes in your business endeavor, and will need to be consistently communicated, verbally and visually, across all media.

At The Heart of It All Is Brand Promise

A relevant, credible, and compelling promise is at the heart of every strong brand. Created by the interplay of key messages and core brand attributes, your brand promise defines your organization and offer, and sets it apart from all others.

A brand promise must, of course, be deliverable. Apple Computer, for example, consistently delivers on the promise of simplicity. Should they choose to develop products that belie that promise, the integrity of their brand would be forever compromised.

Discovering your brand promise is a process of distillation. Imagine putting your key messages and core attributes into a crucible and allowing all that is not integral to evaporate away. That which remains is the company’s brand promise, the immutable element that informs all that the company does, creates, and promotes.



To be successful and sustainable, your company's brand promise must:

- be unique among its competitors
- address imperative concerns of its audiences
- be consistent with your strategic intent
- be a simple, compelling, and honest message, both to internalize as a part of corporate culture and to communicate to all external audiences

How that promise is articulated verbally, and expressed visually, will help set customer expectations regarding the quality and substance of all future interactions, and facilitate a meaningful brand relationship.

Establishing Objectives and Criteria

Once you've successfully clarified what needs to be communicated – key messages, core brand attributes, and a relevant, credible, and compelling brand promise – you will be able to define an appropriate verbal branding strategy, and establish objectives and criteria to guide the creative verbal branding effort.

Realistically, a name can convey only one or two important ideas. You need to decide, from a strategic perspective, which key ideas and attributes should be conveyed by a name and which can be more appropriately communicated by other means.

For example, safety would likely be among the key messages an airline would wish to communicate, but safety is probably not a message that should be conveyed by the name. In fact, being called Safety Airlines might raise questions rather than alleviate concerns. Still, safety is an important brand attribute and it can be effectively expressed through behaviors – how the flight crew interacts with the passengers, the tone of voice of the pilot, the professionalism of the reservation agents.

Your naming objectives will stipulate the one or two key ideas, along with a shortlist of relevant associations and complementary core brand attributes, that must be conveyed via the name. Returning to the airline example, verbal branding strategy may dictate that the primary naming objective is to reference the country of origin (as for Alitalia) or suggest the concept of freedom (JetBlue).

Naming criteria address questions of form. A key criterion for all verbal branding efforts is that the solutions be consistent with core brand attributes: safety would be such an attribute in the airline example. Basic criteria generally spell out that a name should be appropriate, appealing, and legally available. More specific criteria might include how the name will be used, tone and character, words or letter combinations to be avoided, and so on.

Since the naming objectives and criteria will serve as both the springboard and benchmark for the creative name development, it will be imperative that consensus is reached on what they should be before the creative effort begins. The more specific, refined, and harmonious your verbal branding objectives and criteria, the more effective the solutions will be.



Working as a team to establish this strategic framework for your verbal branding endeavor is time well spent. The information gleaned through branding exercises like those described here will inform all brand-building activities. Well-defined objectives and criteria will make the name selection process less subjective and keep the branding effort on track. Most importantly, the process of defining your corporate brand promise and establishing naming objectives and criteria creates understanding among the members of the project team about how the name or other verbal branding solution supports, illuminates, and articulates that promise.

© 2001 *Metaphor Name Consultants*

Metaphor
Name Consultants
articulating brand promise™

582 Market Street

Suite 300

San Francisco, CA 94104

Tel 415•433•6387

Fax 415•433•6389

www.metaphorname.com