

Brand Manifesto

December, 2007 (revised edition)

We need a new word for brand.

“Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.”

Sir Francis Bacon

THE “BOB” MANIFESTO!

We need a new word for brand, and “Bob” will have to do.

Well, in reality, we don’t need a new word for brand—another clever name just to be different isn’t going to help anyone. Instead, what we DO need is a new understanding of what brand truly is. Brand is having a crisis. Abused and misunderstood, it has become everyone’s favorite whipping boy. Now let me state up front—I **LOVE brands!** But the brand I love bears little resemblance to the slick campaigns, shiny launch parties and hyperbole that most people associate with the word.

My brand is a genuine, living thing. It grows and becomes stronger with time and attention. It spreads like a virus, infecting everyone who encounters it. It can be powerful and help lift a company to great heights. But when ignored, it can just as easily help drive its demise.

My brand wants to spread its wings and show people exactly how important it is, how it is part of the whole system that comprises a company—not just a subset put in the corner for the next customer drive, not a veneer applied for promotional purposes, and not a shield for the true nature of the company. So I invite you to join me in my exploration of the new world of what I call authentic brands. This manifesto is a conversation about what that means. Just between you and me, I don’t claim to have all the answers. Actually, I have more questions than answers. But with every question I have explored, certain things have become clearer.

Are you ready to explore with me?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAND

Let’s begin with a quick recap of how we got here. Where did brands come from? (Certain liberties have been taken in the name of space and time.)

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE COWS.

The four-legged property of ranchers—but how to tell one cow from another? How about we burn a unique mark into their hide—let’s “brand” them. The more cows, the more marks, the better known the rancher was. The brand came to represent and embody how the townspeople felt about the rancher—did the sight of the brand on the cow and above the ranch’s gate inspire awe or loathing?

WHAT A GREAT IDEA!

How about we do the same thing with companies. Let’s create a brand—a logo—that will represent the company and put it on everything—our store, our literature, our products. Then people will easily know who we are. And the more they see it, the more successful we will be. From the time Paul Rand drew the ubiquitous IBM logo the deal was done. No company could be successful without a logo.

THEN CAME THE BRAND AS MESSAGE.

Thank you Nike. Now it wasn't enough to simply have a recognizable logo, companies needed to tell people in three words or less everything they needed to know. Slotted under the logo, it was seen to be the magic elixir that would shape how people would think about the company, its products and services. Now let's put it on everything that moves and everyone will believe what it says. Just do it. Right! Except that often the company's actions didn't meet the promise those words made.

WHICH BRINGS US TO PERCEPTION.

Specifically, customer perception—what they think you are is who you are.

The holy grail of brand today is to “create” the right customer perception—that perfect mix of emotion and smarts that will drive boat-loads of customers your way. And the best way to “create” that perception—a louder, bigger message that is put in more places! Slapped on t-shirts and caps for employees and splashed across the pages of magazines, websites and television screens, how could anyone resist? Thankfully that isn't the end of the story...

THE NEXT WAVE

There is another wave on the horizon. I call it the authentic brand. Authentic brands are deeply rooted inside the company. They are much more than the marketing veneer applied to the exterior face of the company. Authentic brands are honest. They are powerful mechanisms guiding decisions and direction across all functions of a company. They naturally filter out to the customer and everyone the company touches through those decisions and actions. This is the brand I love!

What does this mean for your company?

Why does a company even need a brand?

I was asked this question the other day. And I found myself struggling to find a good answer...why DO you need a brand? The conclusion I came to was this: perhaps you don't need a brand, but you most certainly have a brand, so why not use it! As I noted in the “A Brief History of Brand”, my view of brand is not as a subset of marketing. I don't see it as merely a device for connecting with customers and shaping their perception. And it is not a logo or message. While these are all useful and important devices for communicating the brand, they are just that—small pieces of the whole. To paraphrase organizational expert and author Margaret Wheatley in her book *Finding our Way*, brand is “*both what we want to believe is true and what our actions show to be true....*”

So, by that measure every company has a brand—even yours! You don't have to be a Fortune 500 or a sexy start up. You don't need someone else to tell you what it is. You hold beliefs that affect the decisions you make. You act every day in a myriad of ways—every one of which potentially impacts how someone feels about your company (both inside and out). Looking at those patterns across the company, you can see what they tell you. What they say about you is your brand.

Both Inside AND Outside

Consider your own brand. How many things do you do or say every day which unintentionally undermine your brand? Or is what people think of as your brand so out of sync with your every day beliefs and actions that you have no hope of delivering on its promise? Do your employees snicker at the latest tagline or say “yeah sure” when they see the company values? So consider this equation as a place to start:

What we believe + What our actions show = Our brand.

This is the next wave. Brand as an authentic representation of the inside of your company filtering out to the market through all the combined beliefs and actions of everyone who touches it. Employees, customers, partners, investors, vendors—everyone.