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Authentic Expressions

The best brands stand for something, and a lifestyle brand embodies the values of its target group. Successful lifestyle branding means creating an emotional connection to the market, based on a bigger idea and an artistic expression to create an emotional connection. Although the ideas are often conceptual, there are ways to approach brand-building from a logical and quantitative process.



BY ANIKO HILL

Branding is practically inescapable in today's culture. Everyone has an idea of what a brand is in our marketing-savvy climate, and the words "branding" and "brand" have become a familiar part of most adults' vernacular. But the reality is most don't have a grasp of what these concepts truly mean or how they are being influenced by them on a daily basis.

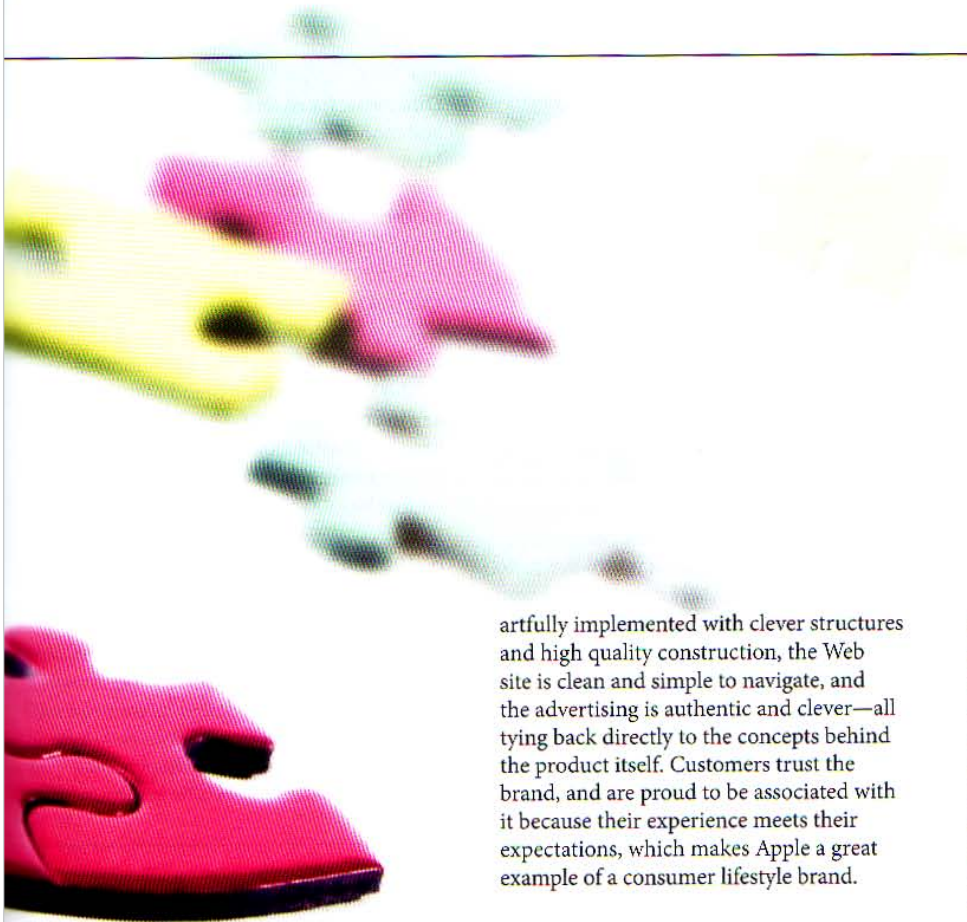
A successful brand is effortless in communicating its message, subtle and often indescribable. Most think that a brand is a logo, ad, great tagline or a combination of these. Although it is true that these are all parts of a brand campaign, the concept of branding as a whole is bigger, broader and much less tangible. This idea is similar to the theory of gestalt in art: the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. Any singular part of a brand campaign may be great on its own—but when combined with a solid, consistent brand strategy executed across all touch points, something much bigger and more magical happens.

The best way to really grasp this abstract concept is not to think of a brand as a "thing" but as the living, breathing organism

that it is. To be successful, a brand should always be changing, evolving and growing—much like a person. In fact, branding experts often think of a brand as a person when conceptualizing about that brand. What is her personality? In what voice and tone does she speak? What values are important to her? What makes her unique? And, most importantly, do you trust her?

Ultimately, branding is simply the public's perception of a product, service, company or even an individual. It is about an emotional connection and a consistent relationship. The best brands stand for something—a big idea, a strategic position and a set of values. They are an authentic expression of the product or service behind it. As marketers, you help your clients create the most targeted expression of the brand possible, but when all is said and done, the brand expression, or the visual and literal messages the company is putting out into the marketplace, has to be completely true to the product itself. Otherwise, the audience will discover the brand communication is not accurate, and their trust and confidence in the product will falter.





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One of the best examples of a successful brand today is Apple. The brand starts with the product, a consistently beautiful and smart industrial design that is executed with top quality and attention to detail. The user interfaces of the operating systems and programs are simple and accessible, and the customer service experience is effective and approachable. So, the words that one could use to describe the product may be "smart, sophisticated, authentic, friendly." If you step back and analyze the brand expression, it is easy to understand why Apple is considered one of the top brands today. Every piece the consumer sees or interacts with, from the packaging to the retail environment, communicates the same consistent message. The packaging is

artfully implemented with clever structures and high quality construction, the Web site is clean and simple to navigate, and the advertising is authentic and clever—all tying back directly to the concepts behind the product itself. Customers trust the brand, and are proud to be associated with it because their experience meets their expectations, which makes Apple a great example of a consumer lifestyle brand.

Creating a Lifestyle Brand

A lifestyle brand embodies the values of its target group. It speaks to the identity of its customers in a targeted, authentic way. A lifestyle brand is especially powerful because it allows individuals to publicly identify themselves with the brand; they are proud of the brand because it is a direct expression of their own values.

The key to successful lifestyle branding is creating an emotional connection to the market. Communicating product benefits and quality is not enough—there must be a bigger idea and an artistic expression to create the indescribable emotional connection that makes a person loyal to a brand. Although this is a somewhat ethereal notion, there are ways you can approach this as marketers from a very logical and quantitative process.

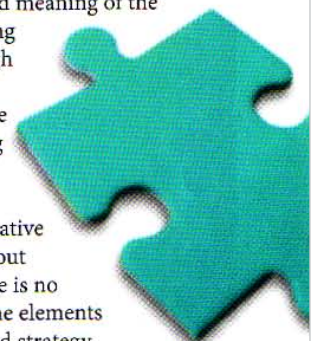
1. Research

Before any brand building can begin, the most important, and often overlooked, phase is research. It is critical to analyze what your competition is doing and saying to define and maintain your competitive edge. On the consumer side, it is important to know your

customers from a marketing point of view, and it is absolutely critical to understand them from a product development point of view. If you don't have a thorough comprehension of your consumers, how is it possible to create products or services for them—let alone try to connect to them on an emotional level? The marketplace is flooded with so much competition in every category, companies must not only evolve their brands but they must also keep their product fresh. A lack of commitment to either product or brand evolution can make a brand become stale—fast.

2. Strategy

Once research is conducted and analyzed, it is essential to create a solid brand positioning strategy and define the core values and meaning of the brand. Meaning is born through developing a comprehensive understanding of a brand in order to inspire the creative process. Without meaning, there is no glue to hold the elements together. Brand strategy defines what positioning a brand will take in the marketplace before the brand identity can be developed. If the strategy is well-informed and targeted, a brand's core values should naturally align with the values of the target market, creating the foundation of a successful consumer lifestyle brand.



Building Consumer Lifestyle Brands

3. Identity

Brand identity is the visual and verbal communication of a brand. It must be an authentic expression of a company's vision, goals, values, voice and personality—and must be appropriate to its target market and business sector. Identity is tangible and appeals to the senses, and should stand out in the densely crowded marketplace. It supports, expresses, communicates, synthesizes and visualizes the brand. Brand identity usually begins with a logo or brand mark, but also includes supporting elements such as color palettes and copy tone. When done well, brand identity should constantly remind the customer of the meaning of the brand.

4. Execution

Branding is a truly holistic process. A successful campaign is consistent through all brand touch points—whether a customer is using a product, talking to a service representative or making a purchase on a Web site. Brand communication

on both visual and verbal levels must feel familiar to have the desired effect. Packaging, copywriting, printed collateral, Web sites, environment and photography style must have a consistent voice and tone for a brand campaign to work in harmony. It is critical that once brand identity is established, it is executed across all communications—both internally and externally. One weak link can have a huge impact on consumer confidence.

Branding Pitfalls

Establishing a new brand or re-branding an existing company should be an energizing and positive experience. But just like remodeling a house, there are always hiccups that can happen along the way and maintenance will be ongoing. Beware of the following pitfalls:

1. Starting without a plan.

Marketing and brand strategies need to be mapped out before work begins.

Otherwise, it can be costly—both with time and money—as it is easy to get off track. Strategy is like a blueprint for your brand campaign—without it, there is no solid foundation for the brand-building process.

2. Believing one great piece will do the job.

A logo, Web site, brochure or package design alone is not enough to communicate a solid and dependable brand identity. The key to consumer confidence with your brand is consistency—which means it must be communicated across all touch points to be successful. There is never a quick fix.

3. Too many cooks in the kitchen.

It is essential that there is a designated team within a company assigned to lead a branding campaign. Since branding is highly creative and sometimes subjective, it is easy to fall into the trap of “design by committee,” especially within larger corporations where too many decision-makers add personal opinions into the mix.

Personal opinion, to a degree, is important because company leaders must feel good about how they are communicating to their audience, but it is critical to remember that good branding is targeted to a specific market that may or may not align with the sensibilities of the individual expressing the opinion. It can be hard for decision-makers to separate their personal feelings to make objective decisions, and the more people involved the more confusing this process can become. The result is often a watered-down, “vanilla” brand that is trying to please so many people that it ends up not making a strong statement of any kind.

4. Mix n’ match agencies.

Although it may seem more economical to hire different agencies or specialists for different pieces of a brand campaign, it can actually end up being more costly. There is always a learning curve when taking on a new creative project of any kind, and each company will, and should, charge

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you for the time it takes to immerse itself in your project. Not to mention, results of working with too many agencies are often inconsistent. Different creative firms will often have their own unique spin or vision for a brand—even if working from a pre-determined strategy and brand guideline. Since there are often no black-and-white or right-or-wrong solutions in brand execution, this can lead to a lot of gray areas for a company to sort out—which translates to more dollars that need to be spent to fix the problem.

5. Creating a brand and then not touching it again.

Like any other living thing, brands must be fed in order to grow. Although the most effective branding campaigns are built around a “big idea,” the meaning of the brand must be clearly explained, communicated and nurtured. Meaning can become amplified over time as the company and culture grow stronger, and meaning can be redefined by customer perceptions based on point of view and experience. It is critical to audit your brand and your market and adjust strategy accordingly—both in product development and marketing. ■ GCI

ANIKO HILL is the founder and creative director of The Kitchen Collaborative, a boutique branding agency that works to create premium lifestyle brands. She has worked on branding projects for Boeing, Disney, Master Foods, Sony, Ketel One Vodka and Red Bull, and has taught advanced courses on branding and packaging design at The Art Institute of California.