



## **The 4 Attributes of a Great Brand**

*Smart and Simple---Small Companies Often Get it Right*

*By Jean Van Rensselar*

Big companies spend big money on branding campaigns that often fall apart. But a small company that spends limited marketing dollars on a focused strategy grounded in sound branding principles can become the brand to beat.

An effective branding campaign with lasting results is *the* most complex marketing activity an organization can undertake. It is a *significant* project. No one should go into a branding effort half-heartedly or without a full commitment to success: A failed branding campaign is much worse than having none at all. The reason being that when it's abandoned, clients will conclude one of three things:

1. Your company lacks strong leadership.
2. Your company has fallen on hard times.
3. Your company is out of business.

Conversely, a successful branding effort will lead clients to the conclusion that you have a robust organization with strong leadership.

Given that branding is so complex and the strategy is different for every organization, I'm not going to get into the nuts and bolts of strategy; rather I'll present the 4 hallmarks of a truly great brand.

1. The Message Creates a Connection to the Company
2. The Message is Succinct
3. The Message is Credible
4. The Message is Compelling

### The Message Creates a Connection to the Company

If you're like most people, you know a million messages/taglines, but don't know which companies they belong to. Surprisingly, even some of the most memorable taglines have very low company recognition. This means, that as far as those companies are concerned, they would be better off not having a message at all.

The goal is to present the message in a format that people can easily remember (such as a tagline) *and* attach it specifically to the organization. The best way to do that is to create a message that incorporates the company name or its product---*Built Ford Tough, Got Milk?* This is the whole idea behind jingles, which are enjoying a resurgence---*Nationwide is on Your Side*. The company in this case is clear, but unfortunately the message is not compelling. I'll get to that in a moment.

### The Message is Clear and Succinct

A well-articulated brand---one that clearly and simply lets customers know why they should buy from you---is a memorable brand. Branding guru Rob Frankel said, "Simply stating something clearly in a society weaned on weak generalities is the first step toward standing out from the crowd and creating a solid brand."

Don't outsmart yourself---don't spend so much time trying to be clever that no one understands the point you're trying to get across. This is a big issue with both humor and acronyms. They rarely work. Lest you think you've got a great idea for a branding acronym, rest assured that at this point all the great acronyms that roll off the tongue and are easy to remember, like NASA and UPS are legally taken (most snapped up by government and armed forces organizations years ago).

CDW represents an increasingly common practice of using an acronym to *reverse brand*. CDW started life as Computer Discount Warehouse, but as it grew executives wanted to lose the discount image, so they re-branded with the acronym. BP and the NAACP have done the same. The names of both organizations are now officially just the acronyms. It's a way around changing a name that's no longer relevant without having to completely rebrand with a new company name

### The Message is Credible

First of all, every company thinks their message is credible. In truth, your branding message probably falls somewhere toward the low end of the branding scale---between meaningless and an insult. Organizations with a message that insults their customers are relying on a message alone to correct a serious deficiency. They make the mistake of assuming that whatever customers think is wrong with their company is all in their heads. Have you ever noticed that organizations with infamous reliability issues brand with messages like, *You Can Count on Us*---as if the mere fact of stating something will erase all the evidence to the contrary.

The same applies to using the word *guarantee*. If you're going to use that word in your branding campaign, it will only be meaningful if the terms of the guarantee are clear and you take the onus of backing the guarantee on yourself (the customer has to do as little as possible to take advantage of the guarantee and the result is worth the time expended). What exactly is a *freshness guarantee* or something like *if you find our products cheaper at another store, we'll refund the difference*. For someone to take advantage of this, he would have to buy something at your store, find it cheaper somewhere else, and go back to your store with the proof and the receipt. For most people, the price difference would have to be at least \$50 to make it worthwhile.

But marketers tell themselves that no one is going to figure out the logistics of actually taking advantage of a guarantee. I guarantee that they do. If not explicitly then implicitly. If you saw a guarantee like that on a \$20 pair of hedge clippers what would you think? Don't insult your customers. The bottom line is that for a branding message to be credible, it needs to resonate---to make sense to consumers even if they can't articulate exactly why.

### The Message is Compelling

The message needs to make people want to go out and do something---purchase your products or services, join your organization, or at least take a serious look at what you have to offer. Messages that are clever for the sake of being clever tend not to do that, but seemingly boring messages often do. On its face *You're in Good Hands* is a very boring message. There's nothing clever or funny about it. No play on words, no acronym, no strategically bankrupt pizzazz. It's a solid message with proven success. Allstate knows that trust is an important factor when choosing insurance and they know how to convey that message.

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Ok, this is all a lot to ask from a simple branding message for a small company, but it can be done. It won't be done by a committee where people vote based on their likes and dislikes, rather than potential effectiveness. History shows that many of the all-time greatest brands were built by one strong focused leader---Sam Walton, Henry Ford, etc. Branding experts believe that only strong leaders make strong brands possible---which is an extension of the theory that all companies are inextricably tied to the personalities of their founders...a subject for another article.

### About the Author

Jean Van Rensselar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized tech-oriented B2Bs. You can reach her at [Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com](mailto:Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com) or 630-363-8081.