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Creating A Powerful Corporate Brand by Steven Howard

Development and management of the corporate brand is one of the most potent tools available for senior executives to use in ensuring the viable execution of the corporate vision. Not only does the corporate image management process provide entrepreneurs and business leaders with the highest level of functional control of the organisation, it also provides one of the most powerful strategic marketing weapons available in the corporate arsenal. Progressive corporate leaders will use this new management and marketing discipline to drive their organisations forward in victory in today's and tomorrow's marketing battlefields.

The underlining principle of this discipline is simply this: **if it touches the customer, it's a marketing issue™**. Nothing touches the customer more than how he or she perceives your corporate image. This fundamental perception will be the major factor that determines whether the customer will decide to conduct business with you and, more importantly, enter into a long-term and mutually rewarding relationship with your organization.

There may be no greater marketing issue than corporate image management in today's increasingly competitive markets. In short, corporate image management will be a key marketing discipline well into the next century. The ultimate battleground for winning and maintaining customer relationships now takes place in the minds, hearts, emotions and perceptions of the customers.

Developing a powerful corporate brand is a circular, continuous, five-phase process that can be applied at any stage of an organisation's development. Unfortunately, the process is usually marketed as a one-off "corporate identity exercise" which CEOs resort to at times of turmoil, during periods of sweeping change, or when they desire to leave their mark on the organisation for future generations.

Corporate image management should not be an occasional stimulus that prompts the senior management of the organisation to regroup and analyse how to project the "best" image for the organisation. It should not be a sporadic or irregular process of rethinking key issues facing the company, and then packaging a plan of action items bundled under an inflated "mission statement" that gets communicated to the people in the organisation.

It should definitely not be a series of temporary measures that are reactions to market conditions that do not change the primary value systems or conduct of the organisation.

When organisations start to think "our customers just don't get it," or "if they really knew and understood us, they'd want to be our partner," the organisation has a corporate image perception problem that is not necessarily going to be fixed through marketing communications. Most likely, the problem requires internal procedures and behaviour patterns to change and be communicated through action, not via a media campaign.

The consultants who come in and tell you that senior management needs to take time away from their busy schedules to participate in a short-term corporate identity exercise are wrong. This leads to the attitude that the corporate image can be fixed through an assigned task force that will tell the rest of the organisation what and how to communicate the corporate identity.

Corporate brand management should be the driving force for a continuous process of thinking and evaluation on how the organisation can leverage its strengths and its corporate persona to evolve into the kind of organisation it desires to be.

It is the constant need for self-understanding and systemic feedback from employees, customers, stakeholders and the market place that is at the heart of an authentic corporate image management process. It is also a never-ending process that must be integrated into all aspects of the organisation.

The five phases of the corporate image management process are:

- Preliminary Audit, Research and Evaluation
- Analysis, Strategy, Planning and Development
- Creative Exploration
- Refinement and Implementation
- Monitoring, Managing and Marketing of the Corporate Image

This corporate image management process helps to ensure that channels of communications within the organisation, and with all appropriate external audiences, are both fluid and multi-directional. Such fluidity helps to prevent miscommunication and better ensures that the organisation has a conscious and collective finger on the pulse of evolving market forces, marketing environment trends, changing customer needs and desires, and relationship development and maintenance requirements.

Internally, the multi-directional and cross-organisational communications result in almost everyone within the organisation understanding and accepting the collective goals and knowing the importance of the path being embarked upon by the organisation. This becomes crucially important when the organisation begins to include partnering and external partnerships as part of its future growth strategy.

The objective of the corporate brand management process is to provide the organisation, on an on-going basis, with a cohesive corporate image management structure, corporate

culture and a set of acceptable internal and external behavioural patterns. A powerful corporate brand will provide optimum competitive advantages, increased employee morale and loyalty, and a future direction for the organisation.

A Qualitative Process

Part of the initial process to developing a powerful corporate brand comprises qualitative interviews with internal and external audiences. The internal interviews are conducted at all levels of the organisation, from frontline staff and backroom support personnel to senior management and the Board of Directors. The interviews with external audiences will include key customers, end users, joint venture or other business partners, shareholders or other stakeholders, suppliers, distributors, retailers, prospective customers and partners, government officials, senior media people and other outside influences, competitors, and members of the general public.

The interviews focus on how the organisation is currently perceived by these key audiences and what perceptions are held about the company's directions for the future and its capabilities to handle or execute change. The objective is to gain an understanding of the market's perception of the organisation by its customers, partners and competition, and to contrast these perceptions with those held by various levels its own employee and management staff. Another aim is to identify the organisation's internal willingness and current acceptance levels for change.

While this research is qualitative in nature, the issues to be examined and discussed during the interview process are highly strategic in nature. The benefit of the one-on-one qualitative interview methodology is that it allows each respondent to focus on those points that are of the greatest importance to him or her. Due to the extreme sensitivity of the topics to be covered during the discussions, an outside resource is definitely required to handle and analyse these interviews. Also, the outside resource must completely ensure the confidentiality of each participant and in no way reveal to the client any details or particulars about which comments came from any individual.

The number of interviews required for this process to be effective is usually a minimum of between 25 and 40, depending upon the size and complexity of the organisation. It is best if the interviews are conducted by two or more researchers or consultants, who then compare notes at the one-third point to see if any trends are already developing or if the questionnaire needs adjusting.

This methodology will yield a tremendous insight into the present corporate image of the organisation, as perceived both internally and externally. Because of the open-ended nature of the specific questions used, the feedback can be readily interpreted into specific observations and recommendations that can be actioned later in the corporate image management process.

The interview process answers these key questions:

- how is the corporate image being portrayed and projected today?
- how is the organisation perceived by its key internal and external audiences?
- how does the image of the organisation compare with those of its competitors?
- how does the image of the organisation compare to the image desired by management?
- will the current corporate image enable the organisation to reach the goals and objectives set for it over the next three to five years?

By starting the corporate brand development process with a review of the existing corporate brand perceptions, the organisation has a clear view and understanding of where it is today, an important criterion when trying to decide how one wants to be perceived in the foreseeable future.

From here, it is a matter of relatively simple steps to create a well-defined corporate brand positioning platform that is supported by the core attributes of the organisation and a series of strategic image marketing objectives that will help to guide future business directions and brand development.

Your corporate brand image needs to be thoroughly thought out, planned, nurtured, executed, monitored and, when necessary, modified. It's the organisation's most valuable commodity and deserves to always be treated as such.

The Author

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