

# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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## BEWARE THE SYMPTOMS OF “BRAND GRANDIOSITY”

*“Given that our clients eat, breathe, live and even sleep their brands—and because their job description and paycheck require that they champion their brands—it can often lead to them cheering themselves into a stilted version of reality...a situation that we refer to as ‘brand grandiosity.’”* (Curt Hanke, Opinion, *Advertising Age*, March 28, 2011)

If any of you are fathers, or like us, even prouder grandfathers, you can no doubt appreciate those most delightful of times when we meet up with an old friend and he or she asks about our families. Nothing pleases us more at those times than to flip open the laptop or touch the photos button on the iPhone screen and proceed to leisurely share about a bazillion shots of our smartest-ever, sure-to-become-magazine-model children (and grandchildren). What’s the point of having kids and grandkids, after all, if you can’t savor those super-proud moments when you can show and sing their praises? It’s one of life’s greatest joys; it’s also human nature.

Funny how the brands we marketers “take care of” so easily become much like our children. Truth be told, and given the chance, we would love to tell our customers and consumers all the wonderful things we know (and feel) about our “brandchildren.” If only we had the time. So, seeing the article referenced in the *Ad Age* quote above—particularly the term “brand grandiosity”—well, we knew exactly what Mr. Hanke was talking about. Actually, just like him in his consulting practice, we also come across a fair amount of “brand grandiosity” in our work with clients. Occasionally it is nothing more than natural pride coming through in a moment of passionate exhortation. But, more often than not, we’ve found that brand grandiosity becomes a barrier to better, more competitive thinking...and, naturally, effective brand-building.

All of this got us to thinking about the most common expressions of brand grandiosity that typically become such a barrier. Call them “symptoms” of brand grandiosity, if you will. Here are the ones that made our short-list:

- 1. Including all the brand’s benefits and features in brand communications.** This, by far, is the most frequently employed expression of brand grandiosity. It probably has its roots in the old “service to sales” mentality—you know, where the brand marketers confuse the Sales Force for the Actual Customer. In such confusion, and out of longstanding habit, the brand team (and their communication agencies) create print ads,

web pages, and sales materials that include everything about the product/brand, including the proverbial kitchen sink, in the event that some Sales Rep might need the information to overcome an individual customer's obscure objection. But, of course, the *real* intended receiver of the print ad, web page, or sales aid—the Customer—cannot begin to absorb, let alone remember, all the wonderful things one might say about the brand. Even more discouraging, very often a good many of these things are equally true for other brands in the category or class...making them even less memorable for one's own brand.

2. **Going to market with no real or *perceived* meaningful differentiation.** As most marketers have discovered these days, it is harder and harder to innovate with products that are, in fact (as in demonstrably provable), better performers than their key competitors. Harder and harder, but not impossible. But even without a test-proven, better-performing product, clever marketers find ways to make their *brands* a perceived better choice—at least for certain segments of the market, if not for everyone. Not-so-clever marketers, however, are apparently content to go to market with “class-effect” functional benefits and, unfortunately, with well-worn emotional benefits (that many brands in many categories have already beaten to death). Honestly, going to market with absolutely no meaningful real OR perceived differentiation for the selected positioning target segments is nothing short of the ultimate in brand grandiosity. It screams out, “I’m exactly the same as everyone else, but I expect you to prefer me anyway...because I’m me.”
3. **Settling for Brand Character bombast.** If you haven’t recently reviewed the definition of “bombast,” here’s what it means: “Pretentious, inflated speech or writing; pompous, overblown.” How many times have you seen a brand positioning statement with something like the following in its Brand Character section: “Authoritative, Leader, Dominant, but Caring and Trusted”? We’ll bet you’ve seen these words, or similar ones, way too many times. If we’re honest, most of the time these descriptors are not really true of our brand; or if they are, they’re almost certainly true of most other well-known brands against whom we compete. Talk about brand grandiosity! The only thing sadder than going with such cost-of-entry Brand Character traits is actually convincing yourself that your brand somehow owns them.
4. **Launching an updated, *evolutionary* package design but expecting *revolutionary* results.** What is it about packaging changes—mainly graphic design changes—that so mesmerize a brand team? Okay, just as with many agency creative people who come up with a new ad campaign they’re sure will win at Cannes, so it is that many marketers fall in love with their new and improved pack design. But here’s the catch: most of the time, when the new and improved design is shown to an outsider (who has not been living through the interminable rounds of incrementally tiny design adjustments), that outsider has trouble seeing the big differences—the “improvements”—versus the existing design! A new logotype, a slight change in background coloration, or the removal of a few too many front-panel bursts all lead to another expression of brand grandiosity. All too often, no one thinks these things are a big deal except the brand team, who of course, are counting on an ensuing big bump in sales.

- 5. Constantly reminding newcomers to the brand (especially outside resources, like consultants) “our category is different.”** Come on, every category of products is different; by definition, each has a different set of product types. So what? The principles of competitive and effective brand-building apply across all categories. When marketers trumpet to newcomers that their category (and by implication, their brand) is different, what they’re really doing is aiming to set themselves up as being somehow more in-the-know than the newcomers. It’s a kind of posturing move, really, and it can easily become a barrier to new, fresh thinking. In goes something like this: “My category is different than others you have worked in...so don’t try to transfer some of those (FMCG?) things you’ve learned to MY business. I know what works, and these things won’t.” Come to think of it, this is more a symptom of “marketer grandiosity” than it is of brand grandiosity.

For today’s marketers, being a brand champion is really important. If we don’t believe in our brands, we’re sure not very likely to get others to do so. But, as Curt Hanke makes clear in his *Ad Age* article, we all need to be *realistic* brand champions. As one of our longtime general manager friends often advises, “If you want to survive, it’s really, really important not to suck your own exhaust.”

## **BOATS & HELICOPTERS**

- To reduce the tendency to “suck your own exhaust,” nothing beats regular touch-points with the brand’s customer or consumer. Sometimes we cannot totally rely on what they tell us about our brand—we’ve all been through focus groups in which some participants tell us what they think we want to hear. But with so many new, real-time and social touch-points available to us, we ought to be able to get better and better opinions about what makes our brand “grand”...and what keeps it from being “grand.”
- Every so often, consider hiring an outside resource to independently audit how grand is the brand. Keep in mind that your brand doesn’t need to be grand to everyone—only to that certain segment at the core of your positioning. It’s probably better to hire someone to do this who has relatively little or no experience working directly in your category—someone with a real set of fresh eyes and ears.
- For the more daring among you, every time the brand team meets to build brand plans, review research findings, or just consider new ideas, appoint someone on the team to be “DA,” as in “Designated A--hole.” In this role that teammate can call BS at any point he or she thinks the team is drifting into brand grandiosity.

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