

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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GETTING CHARACTER REFERENCES FOR YOUR BRAND—AN UPDATE

Of all the brand positioning elements, Brand Character remains perhaps the toughest to understand readily and express clearly among ourselves and to others within the company. It's not so much that we marketers and our colleagues don't get the concept that a brand's character is, essentially, its personality (its "who-ness" rather than its "what-ness"). No, most of us understand that. What seems to make articulating this "who-ness" so difficult is simply not having an adequate language at our disposal. We fall back time and again on what seems to be the universal language for expressing Brand Character—a string of four or five adjectives, such as, "leader-like, strong, popular, trusted." While such "universal" adjectives often reassure the corporate chieftains (how could they not?), they do nothing to help brand-builders differentiate their brand's personality from the others in the category.

In fact, one of our former clients told the story that, several years ago within a leading marketing company, the brand teams from each brand were called to a general meeting. At that meeting a speaker asked all Brand Managers to stand. His next directions were to take a seat if any one of the words he was about to read aloud was also in their Brand Character statements. After reading "trusted/trustworthy" and "leader/authority" nearly 65% of the managers sat down! After only a few more words, barely a handful of managers were still standing.

Obviously, what's needed are new, more telling ways—new *reference points*, really—for making a brand's differentiated personality intelligible to everyone who has a hand in building the brand. Here are some suggestions for those reference points, some "character references," if you like:

- 1. The One Word** -- If you were forced at gunpoint to utter only one word—noun, adjective, verb, you name it—that would distinctively capture your brand's personality, what would that word be? Even better, what one word would your most loyal consumers or customers utter most often? Some years back, while working on the Doritos Brand, our defining brand character **was** captured in one word: *irreverent*. That word not only distinguished the Doritos Brand from others in the Frito-Lay portfolio, but it also differentiated it from competitive snack (not just tortilla chip!) brands. Even more important, everything the brand pursued in those days had to relate back to irreverent—for example, when developing the flavor profile and nomenclature for the brand's first major line extension, the desired outcomes had to be "irreverent"—hence the flavor and name, Cool Ranch. Currently, one of our international clients has done a wonderful job in Hungary linking the word *rascal* to one of its popular brands there. Of course, they define in some detail precisely what attributes of a rascal personality they mean to

employ in implementing the brand's positioning. Everything about the brand must come across as "rascal-like."

2. **The Versus** -- They say that a person is known by the company she or he keeps; but it's also true that one can be known by the company she or he doesn't keep. In other words, who one is not. Translating this approach to our brands, it's often helpful to express your brand's character versus that of another, contrasting brand's...in a format that says who your brand is, and who it isn't. So, for example, we might say the brand character of Virgin Airlines is *cheeky* (to use a British term) without being *smug* like British Airways. In this way Virgin's impudent personality is a positive, fun-filled one. For an even more topical example of the "contra-character" being implemented in the marketplace, how about the current Mac TV campaign featuring the casual-cool but self-assured Mac guy playing straight man to the stuffy, overly-anxious, even-fidgety IBM comic?
3. **The Thought-Bubble** -- You've seen in comic strips and books how sometimes a character's thoughts are made known to the reader via a text-box "bubbling" up from his head. What if you sketched one of your typical, loyal brand-users with one of these bubbles? What short, positive expression—revealing how the user truly feels about your brand as a person—might it contain? The Charles Schwab loyalist might be thinking, *"Here's a straight-shooter...someone who never has hidden agendas or ulterior motives...the only one not requiring a poker face."* A different way of expressing the brand's personality, but one that differentiates (from Fidelity, T. Rowe Price, etc.) nevertheless.
4. **The Party** -- Some of the beer brands have been known to use this technique at focus groups with their consumers: the premise is that there is a wild party going on and your brand just showed up as the latest arrival; consumers are asked to describe what happens now to/at the party? It's an indirect way of expressing a brand's personality impact. So, what DOES happen when your brand shows up? Maybe when Wal-Mart shows up the music switches to twangy country-western mixed with schmaltzy patriotic tunes and everyone orders a Busch beer. But when Target arrives the music abruptly goes to alternative and drinks are cherry kamikazes for the house. In these shifts one can discern two very different brand personalities: Wal-Mart as the down-home, "block party" partier; Target as the "whatever" but convivial partier.
5. **The Surrogate** -- One, sure-fired way to express a brand's character is to embody it in someone or something else that nearly everyone knows...a celebrity, a comic book character, a radio station type, or some icon-like brand from a totally unrelated category. Celebrities are overdone and not always effective: sometimes marketers fall back on "usual suspect" overused celebrity examples (like James Bond or Jennifer Lopez); and sometimes marketers confuse a celebrity personality "surrogate" with actually using that celebrity in communications (which is a totally different consideration). So, one of the positioning-development exercises we like to run with our clients requires placing their brand in a totally unrelated category. For example, we ask a skincare brand manager to imagine her brand is in the retail apparel category—which brand within that category would her brand be most like (or most like to be)? Would it be Abercrombie & Fitch, Banana Republic, The Gap, Diesel, Hugo Boss, Talbot's...? These kinds of analogous

descriptions provide fertile images so that just about anyone can picture the distinctive personality traits from one brand to another.

What should be clear from working with these kinds of “character references” is that articulating and communicating a brand’s character really means bringing the brand to life. And it’s nearly impossible to give life to a brand—as if it were a real person—when all you have at your disposal is dead language. We often talk of (and have written previously about) making the extra effort to give your brand a “3-D Brand Character”...which means expressing it in at least 3 distinct ways: for example, words, pictures, and sounds. Using some of these character references will help you get those added dimensions.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

1. First thing, make the identification and articulation of a truly differentiated (i.e., differentiated within your category) Brand Character a live project on your brand. Assemble the right resources to get it done—such as your Agency’s creative team; your package design creatives; your more creative market research types.
2. Next, set only one ground rule: no string of overused, categoric adjectives allowed.
3. Set up some qualitative research and work through some of the character reference exercises above.
4. Once you have the character expressed just about right, do the most important thing of all: identify what specific product, packaging, advertising, merchandising, promotion, etc. initiatives you will have to implement to continue fostering your differentiated character in the minds and hearts of your target users.
5. Finally, invest in a 3-D (words, pictures, music/voice) Brand Character video that you can readily share with all functions inside the company and even with key customers if desired. The best way to communicate the intended character is to have others *feel* it.

Richard Czerniawski & Mike Maloney

Richard Czerniawski

.....
430 Abbotsford Road
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043
tel 847.256.8820
fax 847.256.8847
.....

Reply to Richard:
rdczerniawski@cs.com or
richardcz@bdn-intl.com

Mike Maloney

.....
1506 West 13th Street, #17
Austin, Texas 78703
tel 512.236.0971
fax 512.236.0972
.....

reply to Mike:
mikewmaloney@cs.com or
mikemaloney@bdn-intl.com



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