



From Awareness to Engagement

Brand Management in the Social Age

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Today's digital world offers opportunities for promoting your brand that we couldn't have imagined a few decades ago. But those same opportunities can quickly turn to challenges and even risks. Effective branding is increasingly critical in the digital age. Now more than ever, exceptional discipline and keen attention to detail are required to ensure your brand delivers on its promise across an ever-expanding variety of touch points.

As society has moved from a traditional production economy to an information economy, our purchasing choices have multiplied. The flood of information available via social media on a 24/7 basis has resulted in information-rich and time-poor audiences. Our purchasing decisions are based on far more than the objective features/benefits comparison. As branding expert Marty Neumeier describes in his book *The Brand Gap: How to Bridge the Distance between Business Strategy and Design*, today we base our choices more on symbolic attributes. What does the product look like? Where is it being sold? What kind of people buy it? Which "tribe" will I be joining if I buy it? What are other people saying about it?

Traditional brand management defined as "the process of maintaining, improving and upholding a brand so that the name is associated with positive results" implies that the marketer has control over brand awareness and perception.

Spoiler alert! You have far less control than you might imagine. As Neumeier astutely says, "A brand isn't what *you* say it is – it's what *they* say it is." Content in the digital universe – created by customers and social media users, not by the marketer of the product or service – forms impressions and informs buying decisions.

In the digital age, brand managers are continually faced with new and different touch points that the market has with your brand. Perceptions are often influenced by sources over which marketers have little or no control.

Social Media

Unlike many traditional marketing channels, social media is not exclusively one-way communication. While using it to promote a dialogue with your audience can work in your favor, it can work against you when what they say back is unflattering.

A quarter-century ago, if a customer had a negative experience with your brand that person might write to you or call to express the complaint, tell a few friends or even write a letter to the editor to more publicly share the issue. While this was never a good thing, the shelf life of these instances was often short and in few cases would result in long-term damage to a brand.

But in 2016, upset customers have more than just those traditional channels to share negative feedback. In addition, they might blog about their experience, share comments in a user forum or online review site, post about it on their Facebook or LinkedIn page or rant about it on YouTube or Twitter. These posts may include direct links back to your own website or social media handles,



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creating a long-lasting connection between your brand and the bad experience. These instances are especially damaging when they go viral.

Brand Navigation in the Customer-driven Digital Universe

Have a strategy. A clear brand strategy is the foundation for meaningful brand management. You cannot control the market's perception if you're not even sure what you want that perception to be. While planning exercises can be painful, take the time to periodically review your brand – including both the tangible and intangible characteristics that contribute to the way people feel about it.

Be proactive. Use the tools available to create or change the perception you want the market to have of your brand. Then maintain a consistent presence to manage your own message and control what the market sees that will influence that perception.

Stay informed. Track what is being said about you online. Set up Google alerts for all versions of your name, tagline, company leaders, etc., and track mentions on various social media channels to ensure you are among the first to see anything referencing your company, product or service that wasn't generated by you.

Engage with Social Networks. Leverage positive feedback by sharing it with others. Keep negative feedback from potentially damaging your brand in the long term by responding quickly, clearly and positively. Offer a public apology for a negative experience, along with a commitment to follow up offline. Quickly reach out to the individual to understand the source of dissatisfaction and work to remedy the situation. Mistakes happen, but sometimes your best advocates are clients who had a problem and then experienced exceptional service in getting it solved.

This article barely scratches the surface of brand management in today's digital world. Many companies have multiple offices or offer flexible work environments, such that day-to-day marketing isn't always executed exclusively by a centralized, corporate department. This can impact consistency in brand appearance and messaging which may lead to your brand becoming diluted and eventually its equity eroding. An assigned brand manager should be monitoring this closely, to ensure every communication or piece of content issued by the company reflects your corporate brand standards.

About the author

Jennifer Marsnik is a senior account manager with Edge Marketing. She specializes in helping clients develop and implement strategic PR and marketing plans that support their overall business goals. Jennifer is a life-long Minnesotan who tolerates the long, brutal winters only so that she can readily feed her obsession with Minnesota Twins baseball.



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