



# BRAND

## The Fundamentals: of Brand Strategy

An Insider's Playbook on How to  
Optimize Your Company's Most  
Important, Most Valuable and  
Longest-Lasting Asset

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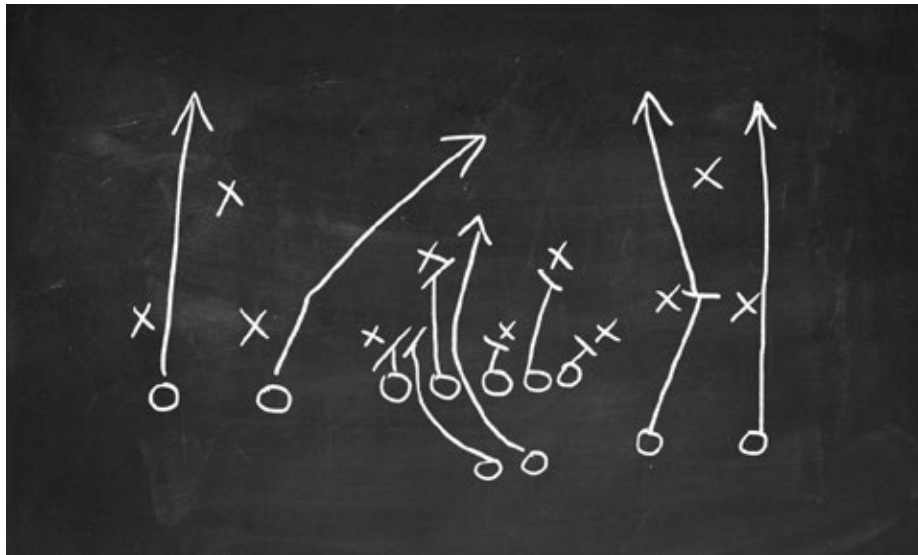
## 1. Foreword

# The Fundamentals of Brand Strategy: An Insider's Playbook on How to Optimize Your Company's Most Important, Most Valuable and Longest-Lasting Asset

**By Dennis Bailen**

**W**hat is a brand? To consider how today's most revered multinational companies have turned their name, logo and value proposition into an ubiquitous force, it's helpful to start back when branding, in the most literal sense of the word, first made its debut on the scene.

Imagine you are a cow, roaming free in the countryside, during the times of the ancient Egyptians and Romans. You may have noticed that painful moment when your owner seared your hide with a firebrand bearing his unique imprint. With that one act, you suddenly became a walking billboard – that unique discoloration on your hide serving as an unmistakable emblem of your provenance. Depending upon the reputation of your owner, that mark may also create a clear emotional connection with those who observe the unique emblem on your hind quarters.



Today's brand strategy, though not typically designed around a painful ritual, does still involve the searing of a name, logo, slogan and other attributes into something more indelible – our conscious. And the strategists who can only hope to capture the imagination of the consumer in the way that Coca-Cola, Kleenex or Disney have done so, must understand the essence of what they are setting forth to accomplish.

As it has evolved today, a brand – in corporate parlance – must unify internal

stakeholders, while serving as a potent competitive weapon to external publics. Long before a pretty picture, emblem or bit of stylized typography are stamped on your front door, one must be able to ask – and answer – the following questions:

- **What can we promise or commit to?**
- **What do we stand for?**
- **How can we own “it” and make it ours?**
- **What can we do that our competitors can’t or don’t?**
- **What do we do that our customers and prospects value?**

During my career, I've had the chance to work with many companies who have asked – and struggled to answer – these same questions. Many times, it required taking a step back in order to forge a more defined understanding of the difference between branding



and marketing. Simply stated, your marketing is what you communicate – your branding is who you are. Branding is not your company's face. It's your company's spine.

In this book, I am pleased to share a collection of perspectives adapted from my blog, in hopes that these may serve as a starting point for you as you consider the importance of brand strategy as it relates

to your business. Each of the chapters can be read alone, and is designed to provide some practical steps you can take with your branding team to ensure your spine, as it were, is rigid.

I hope that these articles provide a sense of perspective about how a well-defined and executed brand can be both a potent competitive weapon and an internal unifying force.

**May the force be with you!**

## 2. 10 Branding Resolutions For The Next 12 Months

- 1. Identify a singular brand promise that you can deliver consistently and will differentiate you.**
- 2. Find a point of differentiation that is relevant and motivating to your target and make it one that you can “own” and make yours and yours only.** (Even a trait you share with your competitors can be conveyed in a unique way and owned.)
- 3. Build your marketing strategy as an extension of your brand strategy.** Similarly your brand strategy is an extension of your business strategy.
- 4. Communicate your brand promise consistently across media platforms and over time.**
- 5. Bring your brand promise inside your organization-through company culture, organization structure and incentive programs.**
- 6. Make sure every employee and associate understands how their role impacts the brand promise.**
- 7. Consider branding your process for project management or customer service.** Branding the “how you do” can be more impactful and differentiating than the actual product or service you deliver (the “what you do”).
- 8. Understand that your brand is much more than your logo and your tag line.** It is the underlying promise behind all that you do.
- 9. Monitor the ongoing relevance of your brand and cautiously and carefully modify it only when required.** Too radical or too frequent modifications will not be credible and will result in confusion.
- 10. Think of your brand as your company’s spine not its face.**





### 3. Brand or Commodity: The Choice is Yours

*What does the state of Michigan, a Perdue chicken breast and Michael Jeffrey Jordan have in common? Indeed what do all brands have in common?*

**The answer is, at one point they were all commodities.**

In its simplest terms, a brand is a relationship between a company and its consumers. That relationship is based on the promise the company makes regarding its values and commitments and the expectation the consumer has regarding the company's performance. The closer the company comes over time to delivering consistently on its promise and meeting and exceeding the consumer expectations that it stimulated, the stronger the brand can be.

Companies with strong brands enjoy consumer loyalty and a degree of price elasticity. Consumers perceive strong brands as familiar, differentiate it from the competition and imbue the brand with confidence and trust.

**Commodities are undifferentiated, interchangeable and compete only on price.**

From the "Hallmark Card" styled campaign, "Your Trip begins at Michigan.org. to the fanatical commitment to quality promised by the Perdue family to the soaring silhouette of MJ dunking a basketball – a brand can be a person place or thing and reap the benefits of a positive relationship with consumers.

Brand building is not about having a huge marketing budget, it is about defining your promise, communicating it consistently and committing to delivering on the expectation your promise creates.

The choice is yours-

**Do you want to be a brand or a commodity?**



## 4. Your Brand. Deliver What You Promise.

**Your brand is more than the message you communicate. It is more than your slogan, your logo and your trademark.**

**Your brand is the promise you make to your customers.** It is your commitment to the type of experience your customers will have and the benefit they will derive from doing business with your company. Your brand strategy defines that promise in a way that differentiates you from your competition and is based on what your customers and prospects value.

**A brand that lives up to its potential is both a competitive weapon and an internal unifying force.** It is imperative that every member of your organization knows and understands the company brand promise and what's more, that each individual understands his or her role in delivering on that promise.

**Your marketing communicates your promise and creates an expectation in your customers and prospects.** Their perception of your brand is based on the aggregate of their experiences with your company and whether their experiences are consistent with the promise you have made.

**Don't over-promise and under deliver.**

Bring your brand into your company.

Make sure your organizational structure, company culture, job training, job descriptions, incentives, performance metrics, etc. are all consistent in support of your brand strategy.

**Every employee must understand their role in delivering on the promise.**

*Your brand is not the face of your company, it's the spine.*



## 5. Brand Strategy and Business Scalability

**Your brand is not only what you say. Your brand is who you are.**

The implication of that distinction is that a brand is significantly more than the products or services your business sells. It is the totality of experience your business delivers to your customers, prospects, vendors, associates, etc.



### **One of the key components of establishing your brand is consistency.**

Consistency of message, to be sure, but consistency of experience is paramount. The consistency of experience you provide to your various stakeholders and its relationship to your brand promise builds their trust, nourishes a relationship and engenders loyalty.

Consistency of experience can only be achieved if your company continually and

regularly executes off of defined and replicable processes and protocols for the overall delivery of customer care and for product or service development and manufacture.

If these processes are not defined, replicable and managed, how can the experiences you provide your customers or other stakeholders have any degree of consistency? And if not, then how can your brand be defined? And if these practices are not defined and replicable, how can you grow your business?

Having a brand strategy does not guarantee your business will grow, but a thoughtful, strategic brand strategy will,

- **at minimum, reinforce and tout**

**or,**

- **at an extreme, re-engineer**

your company processes so that you have the ability to consistently, efficiently and productively deliver the brand promise experience.

The result is a more scalable business delivering a consistent experience through replicable processes therefore, unlocking greater growth potential and productivity.



## 6. Branding: Start With Strategic Differentiation

So much is written about branding. What it is. How to do it.

Sloganeers say it in the tag line. Designers communicate it via the logo, type font and packaging. Social media experts focus on content and the various alternative ways and means to communicate the message.

All of which are relevant and important. But all of which are tactical, not strategic and none of which are at the most fundamental and basic root of branding. And none of which is where branding and brand strategy starts.

Because when you strip away all the noise and all the clutter, what branding is all about, where it starts and what has to be determined before any of the above are contemplated, let alone executed, is the answer to the following question-

What one promise or commitment can you own and deliver consistently, that your competition can't or doesn't, that your customers and prospects value?

However you get to that answer-SWOT analyses, market research, or any discovery process that incorporates your own organization, your competition and the marketplace and your customers and prospects- the answer to that question is what will drive every other marketing related activity in your company-both internal and external. Not only drive those activities but help you make them more consistently and efficiently.



**I don't know which came first-the chicken or the egg. But when it comes to branding and brand strategy the answer is crystal clear.**

## 7. If Only the Pen Had Ink: A Marketing Fable

Last Saturday I went to my local bank to make a deposit. As I entered the bank, I was greeted near the door by a small group of bank employees at a table with coffee and donuts.

**The dialogue went something like this...**

*"Good morning, welcome. How can I help you," one asked cheerfully.*

*"I am here to make a deposit," I replied.*

*"I can help you with that"*

*"No, thanks, I just need to fill out a deposit slip and can handle it."*

*Another asked, "Are you a business owner?"*

*I nodded.*

*"May I have a moment of your time to discuss our special services for business owners?"*

*"Thank you but no I am in a hurry."*

*"Here, please take my card, do you have a card with you?"*

I took the card and begged off, again saying I was in a hurry to get on with my deposit and the rest of my errands.

I then went to the station with the deposit and withdrawal slips and proceeded to fill out my deposit slip. The pen was out of ink. I searched for another pen and found one on the other side of the table, filled out the slip and made my deposit.

As I left the bank, the group gathered near the greeting table wished me a good day and the business representative made a final attempt to engage me and present me with information regarding their offerings.

Perhaps this seems picky and minor, but I found it very ironic that the bank had invested so many resources in time, salaries and personnel to offer greetings and personalized assistance, but on a busy Saturday morning-bank rush hour, if you will- no one had checked to make sure the pens worked properly.

**Moral of the story:** Think about the things you focus on to make sure your customers have a positive experience. Make sure you focus on the things your customers value and pay attention to the details.



## 8. Committing to a Brand Strategy: A Leap of Faith

Clients who hire marketing brand strategy consultants want help defining or refining their brand.

But what does that really mean to them? What are they asking for and what do they hope to gain?

**To me, it means the brand strategy must provide the following three deliverables:**

### **1. De-Commoditize the Company.**

- Find, identify and characterize the one particular notion or concept that company can
  - a. Absolutely own in their category
  - b. Use to their competitive advantage

### **2. Provide Creative and Channel Direction**

- Guide strategic direction and adherence for all marketing communication and activity

### **3. Unify Employee Vision and Focus**

- Help define and communicate core values, commitments and priorities

The client who commits to this marketing path, demonstrates a great deal of courage and conviction and is perhaps even taking a leap of faith.

That client is trusting that their company can stand for only one thing, one core central idea and be successful. They are giving up the comfort of trying to cover multiple message bases with varied claims of value, service and quality.

In addition, they are accepting the notion that one idea can be big enough to accomplish all three key deliverables:

### **1. Differentiate and De-Commoditize**

### **2. Provide Marketing Direction and Consistency**

### **3. Unify and Focus Employees**



My colleagues and I are very thankful and respectful of the courage and conviction of our clients and the trust they put in us. They are committing serious resources in time, headspace and hard dollars. They are entrusting firms and consultants with their brand and the direction it will take their company. We don't take the responsibility lightly.

Thank you for your trust and leap of faith. There are countless examples of companies large and small who have thrived beyond expectation after embarking on the same journey as you.

## 9. American Express: A Great Story About the Power of a Brand

I have always believed that a well-conceived and executed brand is more than a marketing communications message. It is an internal unifying force throughout the ranks of a company. I emphasize this philosophy on my website, [corestrengthmarketing.com](http://corestrengthmarketing.com), and in my blog entitled, “Your Brand and the Mobius Strip.”

Recently I read a speech given by Ken Chenault, Chairman and CEO of American Express, which he delivered to the Economic Club of Washington several years ago. In this speech, Mr. Chenault made the point about the power of the brand on an organization more effectively than I ever could.

Mr. Chenault’s topic was the power of brands and initially he spoke about the American Express brand from a marketing communications perspective and how it evolved as competitive and economic factors changed. Then he turned his attention to the brand from an internal perspective, looking at the brand and its influence on American Express employees.





“Because there is a strong understanding of our brand across our employee base, we’re able to have a principles-based management process rather than a rules-based process.” Mr. Chenault goes on to describe Amex employees’ proactive response to the news about the Asian tsunami of 2004. AE customer service reps proactively reviewed card and travel related transactions and found 10,000 card members/clients likely still in the impacted area. Those reps placed calls to all of those card members to see if they were all right or needed any kind of special assistance. Most were not impacted by the tsunami, needed no assistance, and were amazed and gratified by the unexpected call.

To those few who were in need of help, the reps replaced cards, rebooked travel, and more to meet the card member’s needs. All without management direction or prior approval!

The notion of a principles-based culture rather than a rules-based culture spoke volumes to me about the power of a brand as an internal unifying force. I hope you can also see the potential of this powerful force and put it to work in your organization.

## 10. Brand Strategy: The Tie That Binds

*Do you remember when we were in high school and had to write an essay for a homework assignment?*

One of the key components of a well-written essay, as you may recall from your strict English composition teacher, is the thesis statement. That one statement that expressed the essay's central idea and around which the essay was written.

That is exactly what brand strategy is all about. It is your company's thesis statement

### **Answering such questions as:**

Who are we? What is our mission? What makes us different from our competitors? Why should a prospect do business with us? What can we promise that is valued and unique? What is our O.P.O.? (Please see prior blog at Core Strength Marketing regarding O.P.O.-sorry I could not resist).



The answers to those questions form your brand strategy. That strategy is your company's "thesis statement" and provides focus and synergy to your marketing communications as well as organizational alignment to your employees and colleagues.

Without a thesis statement, your essay likely lacked cohesiveness. The writing may have meandered, confused your reader and not made the point very effectively.

Without a brand strategy, your marketing efforts may also lack cohesiveness. You may be wasting precious marketing dollars and not differentiating yourself or worse, causing

confusion in the minds of those you are trying to reach.

Remember the lesson you learned from your high school English teacher and please consider investing some time and energy on your thesis statement, your brand strategy.

It is the tie that binds your marketing and your organization together. In the end, having a thoughtful brand strategy differentiates you, can save you time and money and make your marketing and your organization more effective.

## 11. Every Company Has An O.P.O. What is Yours?

Every company has an Optimum Positioning Opportunity (O.P.O.). The opportunity for the company to claim a unique strategic position that they can own in the mind of their customers and prospects.

It is the position that will differentiate you from your competitors and be compelling and appealing to the people you want to reach. It is the strategic position upon which you base your brand platform and therefore will influence all of your marketing communications, your company's culture and organization.

**To be truly effective, a company's O.P.O. must address the following three areas:**

1. What can you offer or promise
2. That will appeal to and resonate with your customers and prospects
3. That your competitors either can not or have not yet claimed



**You reach your O.P.O. through a discovery process that encompasses three spheres of factors that affect your business:**

- 1.** Looking within the business itself-its products and services, its culture and organization, its policies and practices
- 2.** Looking at the customers and prospects-who they are, who they aren't, how they decide, what is impacting them and their decisions
- 3.** Looking at the competition and the marketplace-who are the competitors, by product, market segment, geography, and what is happening in the overall market that is impacting the business

This discovery process leads to an area of overlap that addresses those points that enable you to identify that singular and unique promise that will differentiate you and motivate your customers and prospects.

Every company has an O.P.O. Moreover, you do not have to be unique to own a relevant, unique and compelling position around which you can build your brand. A number of years ago a gasoline company claimed they were the gasoline with octane and positioned themselves as the gasoline with pep and will improve your car's performance. What they did not say was that all gasoline has octane.

Don't settle for "me too" strategic positions that are neither differentiating nor compelling. Build your brand around a unique strategic position-your O.P.O.

Every company has one.

**What is yours?**



## 12. The Secret to a Successful Brand is One Thing

In the 1991 movie, *City Slickers*, Jack Palance, playing the tough, experienced and wise cowboy, Curly, advises Billy Crystal, who plays 39-year-old city slicker, Mitch Robbins, and is on a cattle drive with friends in an attempt to deal with his mid-life crisis, that the secret to a happy and successful life is one thing. In the movie, unfortunately, Curly dies before expounding further on that philosophy.

The secret to a successful brand is also one thing. Successful brands know they must own one notion, one concept, one promise in order to stick in the mind of the consumer.



So often, a company wants to “hedge their communication bet”, is reluctant to commit to one idea, and clutters their message and their brand with multiple claims and promises. The belief is that their marketing dollars will be better leveraged if the communication includes multiple claims and benefits. More often than not, the opposite is true-multiple claims leave then owning nothing in the mind of the consumer.

Successful brands like Fed Ex (overnight), Heinz Ketchup (anticipation-thick, rich),

Energizer (keeps going and going) build their brand around one central notion. It takes a courageous and perceptive company to go through the discovery process, find their optimum positioning and brand strategy and commit to that one notion.

The fakir pictured above can lie comfortably on a bed of nails, but remove all but the one nail in the center and even the fakir above would not press upon it. The fakir knows what successful brands know...

**...One point penetrates.**

## 13. Your Tag Line is Not Your Brand

It has been very gratifying to get feedback on blogs I have written. It is not only nice to know they are read but also to know that they stimulate thought. My intention is to share my views and hopefully help companies be more effective in their branding efforts.

Some of the feedback on prior blogs I have recently received from a variety of company executives goes something like, “I know my brand’s one thing!” “I know our company’s O.P.O.!” Then they go on to recite their company tag line.



While a company tag line or slogan and the brand must be intricately intertwined, to define the brand in terms of the tag line is to sell the potential power of the brand way short. It feels like the difference between strategy and implementation. Think of the company brand as more of an overall concept. It encompasses the company’s attributes, characteristics and values. It can be expressed in many forms, including a name, symbol, logo and tag line. When put to its optimum use, it is both a potent competitive weapon and an internal unifying force.

A tagline is merely the sentence or phrase that sums up the brand’s tone and premise. It is one of the ways the brand concept is communicated but it is not the brand. For it to be effective, it must be memorable and represent the brand accurately both in denotation and connotation. A tagline is typically brief and “punchy”. It is essentially squeezing the

brand concept into a memorable marketing package.

Below is a list of 15 of some of the most effective tag lines of the last few decades. I think you will see that while these are very impactful and memorable, they are not the same as the brand concept.

For example, the tag line Got Milk derives from the understanding that while consumers may not choose milk as one of their initial beverages of choice, there are certain foods with which no other beverage but milk will work as well. Warm chocolate chip cookies and a soda anyone?

In the case of Just Do It., Nike has developed a call to action tag line inviting you to participate in a more active life style in support of a brand that provides apparel and equipment to enhance the appearance, feeling and performance of the recreational and professional athlete.

As you define or refine your brand, start with defining the brand concept. Who is your company, what are you promising that your competition either has not or can not promise (your O.P.O.) and to whom. Once that is accomplished, marketing communication such as tag lines and execution of other materials becomes much easier and more focused.



## Some Memorable Tag Lines

Got Milk?

Don't Leave Home Without It.

Just Do It.

Where's The Beef?

We Try Harder.

Tastes Great. Less Filling.

The UnCola

Think Outside The Bun.

Have It Your Way.

I Can't Believe I Ate the Whole Thing.

Does She or Doesn't She?

What Can Brown Do For You?

Membership Has Its Privileges

Takes a Licking and Keeps on Ticking.

Please Don't Squeeze The Charmim.

California Milk Processor Board

American Express

Nike

Wendy's

Avis

Miller Lite

7 Up

Taco Bell

Burger King

Alka Seltzer

Clairol

UPS

American Express

Timex

Charmin

## 14. Your Brand and the Möbius Strip

A Möbius strip is a unique geometric shape. It is the only shape where the outside surface and the inside surface are on the same continuum. See for yourself. Take a long, thin strip of paper. Give one end a half twist and then tape it together. It should look similar to the picture above.

What you now have is a one-sided, one-edged piece of paper called the Möbius strip. To see that it has only one side, try drawing a line along one side and continue until you end up where you started. You will see that the continuous line is on both the inside and the outside of the strip with no break; seamlessly.



Your brand should function like the Möbius strip. Your brand should and can be so much more than the promise you make to your customers and prospects in your advertising, social media and all of your collective external marketing messages. Your brand can also be an internally unifying concept that helps your employees understand their individual roles in contributing and reinforcing your brand promise. More than marketing communication, you can use your brand to define your company culture and guide the organization, the people and the processes.

When you think of your brand, don't go halfway.

**Think of the Möbius Strip.**



## 15. Brand Strategy “How” Can Be More Compelling Than What

Often, when companies think about brand strategy and differentiation, they think about the products or services they offer as their point of difference and build their brand promise around them. In other words, they focus on the “what they do” and build their positioning and communications around that notion.

*“No one offers better quality...” “Ours is the best value...” “We make the most ...”* In most cases,

however, the products or services a company offers are not very different, if at all, from those offered by their competitors. Perhaps even more to the point, as I review testimonials provided to my clients by their customers, most of the testimonials I see speak not to the products or services my clients provide but to the positives about how they provide those products or services. In other words, the customers are commenting on the “how they do” more so than on the “what they do”. Why-because assuming the actual products are at par with the competition, this is what the customer values. Some examples...

*“I really appreciate the fact that when I need info I always get a quick response.”*

*“You guys are very easy to work with”*

*“...your quick responses show you actually care...”*

*“Your company is great to work with ...”*

As you formulate your company's brand strategy, think about the “how you do” and not only the “what you do”. In my experience, I have found that process; the means by which you service your customers, and/or the means by which you design, develop and deliver your product or service, can be codified, “productized” and branded. In many cases this branding and “productizing” of process can be the most potent and compelling differentiator for a company and can be the optimum brand strategy-both as an external competitive advantage and as an internal unifying concept.

**When you think brand strategy, think about productizing and branding your process. Think beyond the what you do and think about the how you do.**





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