

Creating a Brand Strategy

How to gain an advantage in today's highly competitive work environment.

By Catherine Kaputa

LIKE IT OR NOT, smarts, talent, and hard work are important to business success, but they are overrated. We all know a lot of smart, talented people who are not doing well professionally or are unemployed. And we know hardworking people who are toiling at the bottom of the corporate pyramid and being passed over in promotions.

Strategy is underrated, but much more valuable. Having a strategy gives you a lot of advantages. When you develop a strategy, it forces you to think, and that in itself will give you an advantage over many people. Strategy also compels you to think big picture and long term. When you look at successful people around you, you might notice that they may or may not be the smartest, most talented, or hardest working, but I'll wager they each had a strategy (whether or not they called it that).

One way to develop a successful career strategy is to get guidance from the strategies of successful brands. Strategy is the brains of a brand's success. Strategy is developing a winnable position in the marketplace with a smart game plan and tactics for achieving it. In a lot of ways, people are like brands—they need to be perceived as relevant and valuable in a highly competitive environment. And brands are like people—that's why brand managers give them a personality, distinctive look, and message.

When you think like a brand, you gain an enormous advantage in today's highly competitive, dynamic work environment. This article highlights some key principles of brand strategy and four brand positioning strategies that clients have used for career advancement.

Be the first

Everyone knows that being first has its advantages. The first mover generally ends up the leader in the category and is often the one we keep in mind. And because it's first, everyone believes it to be the best in its category.

Being first is a formidable advantage. Michael Dell was the first direct seller of personal computers, and he currently dominates the business. Jeff Bezos created the first online book and retail marketplace, and it is now number one. And the list goes on and on.

You're probably thinking, "These are business giants, and this kind of accomplishment would be impossible for a mere mortal like me. How can I be number one in anything?"

You don't have to be a brilliant inventor to create a first. New categories are popping up all the time. You just need the proper mindset. Often, you can slice the category to create a new subcategory and be first in that. Think of it as carving a new niche out of a category. The "be the first" strategy is a very successful one for entrepreneurs, but executives can use it too. Enterprising employees or intrapreneurs often create a new market niche, such as a new type of product, service, or customer niche. These firsts may end up being enormously profitable for the company and for the employee's self-brand.

Be the leader

There are many ways of defining yourself as a leader. You could be the leader of your department, your company, or your favorite charity. Or you might be the leader in sales at your com-

pany, or a leader in sales in a segment of the market.

Many professionals have leadership claims and feel they are acting like leaders, yet they are not perceived as leaders. To be perceived as a leader, you must lead with ideas and lead by example.

For example, Emily had recently been promoted to head a department at her company. Her first task was to rally her team under her leadership. In order to articulate a department mission, Emily created the mantra "Full engagement." She wanted to introduce a new sense of engagement that included a passion for

excellence, a focus on clients, and innovation. Emily asked each of her managers for a five-page memo outlining key initiatives, including what the company should do to get employees more engaged with clients and the business itself. She then implemented the best suggestions. Her group's focus on "full engagement" landed more business, created a dynamic spirit, and positioned Emily as a leader.

Take the anti-leader position

As much as leaders are part of the mythology of our country, so are underdogs. We have a soft spot for the rebel or the lone defier of convention who doesn't follow the path of the established leader.

Volkswagen put the "anti-leader position" strategy on the map when it introduced the Beetle to the United States in the late 1960s. The brand was positioned as the antidote to the big-car habit, with now classic advertising headlines like "Think Small" and "Lemon." So for every Microsoft, there is

an Apple, a brand that symbolizes the opposite of the dominant leader to its customers. And in the self-brand category, Michael Moore is a classic example. His movies and books tweak the establishment.

The anti-leader position could be risky, particularly if you work in a corporation (although many do have a few maverick employees). It's a self-brand strategy adopted mainly by people who are confident in their positions or have carved out the company rebel niche. You build your point of difference as the antidote to the establishment. You symbolize fresh thinking.

Own an attribute

The most common positioning strategy for brands is to own an attribute. Mercedes-Benz's brand strategy is built around prestige, BMW's is driving performance, Subaru's is ruggedness, and Volvo's is safety.

For this strategy to work best, you need to select a brand attribute that is credible for you and gives you maximum opportunity in your category.

For example, when Pampers first developed the disposable diaper in the early 1960s, sales were poor. The marketing centered around convenience, a brand attribute that had a clear-cut benefit for busy moms. Moms didn't have to disinfect and clean the diapers themselves or use an expensive diaper service. Convenience was especially beneficial for moms on the go with their babies. They didn't have to carry stinky cloth diapers around with them until they got home. But that attribute positioning didn't resonate with mothers. They felt guilty. Cloth diapers were best for babies, while paper diapers were best for moms. So moms voted with their hearts, and sales were poor.

Then Pampers changed its brand positioning to "better absorbency," which was a benefit for babies. Mothers could buy the diapers and feel that they were doing what was best for their babies, not best for them. Sales took off, and cloth diapers and diaper services went the way of the buggy whip.

Every category is associated with at-

tributes that are important to customers and prospects. And you can slice your industry, profession, or job category to find the best fit for the attribute you want to own and the category in which you want to do it. Your job as a self-brander is to stake your claim to the attribute that is best for you and is not owned by a competitor in the arena where you will have the most impact.

One client, Benjamin, had just been promoted to president of his company. The good news: It was a great job. The bad news: It was a difficult job. Sales revenue was down, and his industry was in a serious economic slump. Benjamin's first task was to rally the troops and unify the company, particularly the division heads, most of whom were strong personalities with a tight grip on their fiefdoms.

Benjamin built his personal-brand strategy around the attribute of follow-through. It was an important attribute, one that many colleagues and employees associated with him because of his track record. Other executives might have great creative skills or people skills, as Benjamin did, but none had his sense of accountability and follow-through. Benjamin took positive action to embed the attribute in the company culture. One of the first things he did was broadcast his management philosophy to all the employees. His rallying cry was "Follow through, everywhere, all the time."

As you can see, self-branding isn't about self promotion or screaming, "Me, me, me!" It's about thinking of yourself as a brand—a product that can be viewed strategically and creatively in a competitive marketplace to bring maximum value to you and your company.

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