

Let's Make "Brand" a Noun, Not a Verb

It's that time of year again. And I don't mean feeling guilty over broken New Year's resolutions and counting the number of days until spring. No, I am referring to the seasonal rush to complete branding campaigns in time for the Super Bowl.

Now is a perfect time to raise the question: When you think of the word "brand," do you define it as a noun (being a brand) or as a verb (branding)?

Not understanding this distinction has led many clients to devalue "brands" and, by extension, what we as an industry offer our most important constituency: consumers.

We, correctly, tell our clients that they need to be a brand. And by that, we mean they need to think and behave like a brand: defining their products and services in differentiating ways and aligning everything within the company—from service to distribution to the customer experience—behind that definition.

But rather than stop there, many practitioners turn brand into a verb and thereby into a strategy and develop something called "branding campaigns," an expensive and dubious endeavor.

Frankly, I am not sure what a "branding campaign" is (although I am told that I have been a part of many in my career). Do we really think that there is some mystical form of communications that actually creates a brand? Communications can't create a brand. Sure, communications can build a brand's awareness. It can make you think differently about a brand. It can even reposition a brand. But it can't create a brand. That's up to us as marketers.

While we struggle with our nomenclature, clients have confused "branding" with "brand" and, in the process, lost faith in brand as a noun. And that's a tragedy. Because brand as a noun is what separates most products from the competition—regardless of how great their distribution channel, how revolutionary their technology or how strong their sales force.

For many clients, "brand" is now synonymous with branding campaigns, which to them equals big budgets for glitzy TV commercials with little to show for the effort.

Maybe that's the real reason behind the reported absence of Visa and McDonald's® from last year's game. With so many brands competing for attention on Super Sunday, it makes more sense to stay on the sidelines or, better yet, tie in with other sporting events (the Olympics, the NBA All-Star Game, etc.).

But let's not forget that no matter where you place your message, when you behave like a brand, you create definition: something tangible, something intellectual, something emotional. Brands create desire, distinction and consumer demand. Brands marry the head with the heart, the rational with the emotional, to create real difference in a world of commodity products and sameness.

Contrary to what most clients now believe, developing a brand is not necessarily expensive. Developing a brand is an intellectual exercise, not a spending exercise. On the other hand, branding as a communications strategy or, if you will, as a verb, is. And we have not clearly told clients how the two are different.

Whether you see "brand" as a noun or a verb, whether you have just one dollar or over \$100 million to spend, you should always act like a brand. And that's why, for me, "brand" is and always will be a noun.

Let's do everyone a favor and stop thinking of brand as anything other than a noun. If we get back to developing a brand, the Super Bowl may be a fine place to generate awareness for it but not the instrument that creates one. Just ask Janet Jackson.



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