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"Myth & Mystique: Growth Brands Are All About Marketplace Behavior"

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Myth and Mystique: Growth Brands Are All About Marketplace Behavior

All the smoke now being blown around the concept of "branding" is clouding the realities of what it is in authentic practice.

In the pioneering days of Madison Avenue consumer marketing, message and image — without accountability for behavior — was acceptable. At that time, we were in the era of the Marlboro man (who, in reality, died years later of smoking-induced cancer).

Branding is now well established in the business-to-business realm. It has also taken hold in our politics, government, religion and culture. Even human resource experts tout the need for applicants to become their own "personal brand" to compete in the job market. Brand equity is now an essential organization asset on par with financial resources, real estate, inventory, and human capital.

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In today's competitive environment, a sustainable corporate brand — one that effectively supports organic growth — must successfully meld core characteristics, values, competitive differentials and the sales proposition into a single, compelling embodiment. It must become ingrained as a values phenomenon throughout an organization's anatomy, and then be consistently applied in behavior at every touch point in the growth strategy: from new product or service innovation, alliance-collaboration building and human resources practices, to senior executive thought leadership, channel partnering, intellectual property management, technology transferring and outsourcing strategies.

When a brand is built on fundamental, sustained behavior, it will have widespread impact on the success of any growth plan, from reducing cost and improving productivity to creating internal community to support it publicly. Good brand behavior will also help ensure a more fluid execution of the business strategy and a strengthened culture of loyalty that will support smoother organization transformation during change. Credible brand behavior also creates a platform upon which competitive encroachments may be more effectively combated, and fosters truthful communication that helps instill integrity in management and business practices (i.e., financial accountability, leadership sustainability).

Examples abound of how the right brand behavior contributes to sustainable growth and marketplace durability during times of great opportunity as well as great stress. Just consider the actions of three of America's most respected companies.

General Electric is known for setting high standards, not the least being in human resource practices espoused during the reign of former Chairman Jack Welch. The core values in attracting and managing world-class employees have disseminated to every touch point in the GE brand experience. GE's leadership has been particularly apparent with the new corporate governance and accountability requirements of Sarbanes-Oxley, proving there is no cost too high for a brand's credible leadership during a crisis in public confidence.

Health care giant Johnson & Johnson has facilitated growth almost single handedly from its reputation as one of the most trusted companies in the world. As a result,

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they have successfully sustained and grown trademark brands over generations, launched new product innovations that have redefined their categories, and attracted strategic alliances to build some of the most fruitful partnerships in American business. J&J's quick and high-risk response to the Tylenol poisoning crisis during the 1980s is revered as a shining example of corporate integrity, sealing its destiny as one of the most durable American brand names. J&J remains recognized for an unusual commitment to the values of quality, dependability, and customer safety (doing the right thing).

Beginning with former Chairman Jack Bogle, investment management leader The Vanguard Group defined competence and integrity in its industry, which has enabled the firm to successfully grow its product portfolio by mere extension of its core values of competitive performance, customer-focused product choice, trust, and expert client service.

If behavior is key to building a durable brand for competitive growth, then corporate leaders must correlate any brand promise with the scope and character of the organization's actions. Try this test:

Do you adequately fund the resources needed for responding to customer problems with correct quality?

Do you cut costs by using inferior components, or by taking shortcuts in your manufacturing process, that result in product obsolescence for the customer?

Is your idea of community involvement to write a check, promote it, and forget it — rather than direct those funds into a flextime program to reward employee volunteerism, or partner with philanthropic organizations for training programs that empower employee activism?

Do you assign resources to the continual tweaking of first-generation product releases to maintain mass appeal and short-term returns, with no set aside for R&D that would evolve products responsive to customer aspirations long term?

Do you re-engage lapsed customers by seeking out their feedback on why they left, and do you have an active restitution process to restore their good will?

Have you developed a "trust zone" for shared intelligence and non-threatening collaboration with competitors that benefits your industry and customers at large?

Do you support fair employment practices with progressive pro-diversity and non-discrimination policies?

Do you comply with industry regulations only in a reactionary mode, rather than proactively supporting new standards by setting your own example?

Do you "put people first" by offering day care for employee parents and flextime or telecommuting options for employees juggling the demands of family?

Do you advance a customer centric business model by training front line employees and supporting them with proper supervision so that they may be informative facilitators in meeting evolving customer needs?

These questions test your legacy behavior — a core component of brand equity. As we enter a new era of corporate growth that is not solely premised on mergers and acquisitions, but equally driven by a variety of organic initiatives, particularly innovation and transformation, good brand behavior will pave the way for dependable public and private consensus at the time you need it the most: when you're ready for growth!

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