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## Give them something to talk about: Building an authentic brand

**BY DENISE PATRICK**  
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A brand is not a logo. A brand is not a mission statement. A brand is not a vision. A brand is not a list of values describing a company. At the end of the day, a corporate brand is the story people tell about that company. It is the story employees tell each other. It is the story shareholders tell the marketplace. It is the story customers tell when giving referrals to others.



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Manufacturers and marketers of consumer products have understood the power of branding for many years. Corporations in the business of selling to other businesses have long struggled to capture the value that a powerful brand can add to a bottom line.

Creating an authentic brand narrative is more than a marketing exercise. A good story inspires action and creates credibility. It generates the most powerful and profitable marketing tool available word-of-mouth by giving people something to talk about.

A strong brand — whether the business is large or small — is based on a promise made to the customers. It defines the offering and how that offering will be delivered. Identifying a brand that resonates with a target audience starts by acknowledging the reality of the business. These questions must be asked:

- What is being sold?
- Who is it being sold to?
- Why are they buying it from this company instead of a competitor?

To develop a brand narrative, companies should push themselves to go beyond the standard answers of quality or technology. If the company offers a high level of quality, ask, “How do customers know the company is a premium provider? How can it show them?”

In today’s highly skeptical marketplace, a marketing department has to do more than produce a brochure announcing its product is the best. That’s old news. Every company says it is the best. Guaranteed: No one uses a tag line that reads: “Buy from us. We’re mediocre.”

There is power in demonstrating differentiation. Remember, facts tell and stories sell.

Often, customers are the most valuable sources of brand narratives. Ask them to tell the story of how they made their choice. Start at the beginning by asking questions to uncover their motivation to look for a solution.

- What problem were they trying to solve?
- How did the problem develop?
- How did they know it was a problem?
- When (and why and how) did they decide to take action to resolve the problem?

Then, ask questions to discover their perceptions about corporate image and positioning in the marketplace.

- What were they looking for in a solution?
- What specifically did the company do to show them how they could help?
- What influenced their decision?
- How did they explain their choice to others?
- Have they referred the company to anyone? What did they say?

By capturing specific details, a brand narrative will take shape.

Often the smallest details can make the difference in communicating a memorable

brand to a customer base. For example, a small local catering company had a large number of downtown firms ordering box lunches and was continuing to grow at record rates.

What was the secret of its success? A piece of ribbon around the box and tissue paper inside created a powerful customer experience. The extra touches gave clients a feeling of opening a gift. It created an impression of luxury. For a few pennies per box lunch, the firm was able to charge \$2 or \$3 more than its competitors, and it enjoyed a strong reputation for a premium product.

A rich brand platform allows a company to build a number of different stories to enhance its corporate image:

- Employees will tell each other stories to validate their experience of who the corporation is and what it is like to work there.
- Leadership will tell brand stories to inspire teams to action.
- Research and development engineers will use stories to think about ways customers will use a new product and how it will make a difference to them.
- Marketing experts will develop stories to communicate the brand to prospects before they decide to buy.
- Salespeople will use stories to demonstrate the benefits they bring to a client and to create credibility.
- And customers will tell the story of what it was like to work with the company.

Or they won’t say anything — if there is no story to tell.

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