

Taking Your Brand to Market

By Nicholas T. Miller

Are your field sales people taking your brand to market? If you hear multiple answers to the question, “What is our company’s sales process?” you are diminishing your return on investment in branding.

If you were a rancher in the Old West, branding was simple. Your ranch hands heated artfully bent pieces of iron and pressed them firmly and steadily into the sides of unwilling and unsuspecting calves. The brand connected your beef (a commodity) to your ranch so you could claim it as your own at round up.

In modern banking, consulting, and other industries, marketing managers now wear the ranchers’ hats, spending millions of dollars carefully researching and creating brand images to fire their branding irons.

Brand Delivery Failure

Frequently, however, the modern-day branding process breaks down in the last step, where the brand should be applied. Why? Because the brands are not delivered in the field by sales people. Companies have left the critical last step of the branding process to chance, saying “We hold sales people accountable for their results, not for how they produce them.”

This is brand delivery failure. If each of your salespeople defines his or her own methods for working with customers and generating sales, your sales team is creating a portfolio of individually unique brands instead of one uniform brand for you. When this happens:

- customers feel confused about your message and why they should continue to be your customers;
- your company is vulnerable when key sales people leave -- customers may follow the sales rep or consultant they liked since that individual, rather than your company, represents the brand to them; and
- each new rep you put in the field has a different approach than the last one, which thus muddies your brand message.

Steps to Impress Your Brand

There are four steps that will help you maximize brand delivery in the field, so that your customers are tightly and happily connected to you.

1. Translate your brand image into a rich description of the unique customer experience that represents your brand to your desired customers.

For example, if you intend to position your salespeople as “trusted advisors” to your clients, you need to describe the experience of trusted advisor from the client side. You must develop clear statements of client expectations in terms of responsiveness, reliability, expertise, tangibles (like descriptive brochures), and interpersonal connections.

2. Define the sales methods, processes, and activities needed to create that unique customer experience, including:

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- when these activities are to be done,
- with whom they are to be done,
- how often they’re to be done, and
- how they’re to be done.

For example: Do you send a confirming agenda letter prior to a meeting? Do you send thank you notes or follow up letters after sales calls? If so, after what types of sales calls? What should the notes say? How should they look? What should be enclosed? When should the next contact take place?

The descriptions should include specific guidelines on how your representatives should introduce themselves in a call, how they state your value proposition, how they conduct their interviews, what presentation materials they use and how they use them, and how they write proposals. Major accounting and consulting firms, for example, have practice standards that describe these elements. Other service companies who are serious about their service branding, like Federal Express, McDonalds, and British Airways, also have defined standards.

3. Establish measures for determining whether the experience is being delivered and whether the customers still like it.

Measure every possible angle of the customer experience and sales representatives’ delivery. How? Direct observation by management is powerful. Surveying customers, either through interviews or pencil-and-paper surveys (“Why did you buy from us/not buy from us”) is useful.

4. Relentlessly inspect and correct.

Consistency is critical to building brand value. While you’re sure to hear cries of “you’re micro-managing us,” the message to the sales reps is: “We’ve developed a brand and a way of selling (delivering the brand) that will make money for all of us. We require you to use that system. We’ll teach you our way of selling, so that you succeed and our company succeeds. We want a unified, consistent voice to the market.”

Benefits of Consistency

There are three primary benefits to this approach:

1. The company captures more of its brand value because the organization is defining it, not individual sales people or consultants. This leads to institutional brand equity rather than individual brand equity.
2. You can identify and correct break-downs and problems faster because there is a well-understood, well-defined “right way” that you are measuring and coaching.
3. You can make changes faster and more consistently (when your customers tell you they want changes) if everyone is using the same branding process.

When done correctly and consistently, you’ll be assured that your brand will make a lasting impression on your customers and prospects.

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