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Online branding

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Abstract

The role of brands and branding in the new economy that is characterised by digitisation and globalisation are attracting considerable attention. Taking the organisational perspective the challenges for branding in online environments relate to: the message capacity of Web pages, the need to integrate branding and marketing communications across different channels, the trend towards organisational value propositions, brands as search keys, the opportunity to link and develop brand positions, globalisation, and the increased engagement of the public sector with branding. In the context of the brand experience, key themes are customer control, customisation and customer relationships, the help yourself nature of the medium, the increasing emphasis on experience, and the opportunity offered by m-commerce to revolutionise the brand experience. An online brand development strategy includes the following stages: setting the context for the brand, deciding on brand objectives and message; developing a brand specification; developing a brand design, creating the Web site and other communications using the brand, launching and promoting the brand, building the brand experience, and finally, reviewing, evolving and protecting the brand.

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Introduction

A brand is not a name. A brand is not a positioning statement. It is not a marketing message. It is a promise made by a company to its customers and supported by that company . . . I may have intelligent agents that can go out and assemble pages of reports on every camcorder on the market, but I don't have time to read them. I'll buy Sony (Sterne, 1999).

Online branding is discussed in nearly every book on e-marketing or e-business. Some argue that in a world of information overload, brands become ever more important, because they save the customer time, by reducing their search costs. This position can be further developed by arguing that brand building will be increasingly important in providing continuity and customer commitment in a fast moving marketplace. In an electronic shopping environment where physical interaction is reduced and product qualities and benefits must be distilled and captured in a way that can be communicated over the wires, online branding may be increasingly important. Others argue that with the wealth of information on the Web at their fingertips, coupled with intelligent agents and search engines to help them locate the information, products and services that they need users will no longer need to rely on the shorthand of brand. Instead they will gather detailed information on products and services and make their own judgments on the suitability of a product making brands superfluous.

Library and information services and a range of other intermediaries or cybermediaries in the information industry face specific challenges. Information based industries have been the most affected by the digital revolution, with the products and services that they offer being capable of digitisation at many stages in the customer relationship. Marketing communication, selling and transactions, and delivery can all be executed digitally. The Web page is not just another channel designed to increase visibility and access; it is rapidly becoming the shop window for many players in the information industry. The first impact that a digital information provider makes on a potential user or customer, and the greeting that they provide to returning customers is embedded in the home page, and the other parts of the Web site that users frequently visit. A well-designed digital experience will also embed opportunities for e-mail, telephone or personal contact with service agents (i.e. people) and components of service delivery (as embedded in functional elements of the Web site such as a search engine, transactions to deliver print or electronic copies, or the delivery of other items ordered through the Web site). Service agents

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and service delivery can reinforce the initial message or detract from it, but the initial message is communicated through the relatively impersonal means of the Web page. This means that it is particularly important for information providers to be at the leading edge of online branding. In addition, the new economy characterised by digitalisation, customer relationships and globalisation is leading to rapid change in industry and marketplace structures that affect both private and public sector enterprises. In such an environment, intangibles such as brands, designs, patents and trademarks will become the financial bedrock of the future corporation (De Kare-Silver, 2000). In sectors in which branding has only played a limited role in the past, branding will be an increasingly important tool in building customer familiarity and confidence. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that many of the designers of library Web sites have been preoccupied with Web site functionality, and have not lingered long on the question of brand or corporate identity. For many Web sites the focus is on the service offered, rather than on promoting an image of the library service.

This article commences with a review of the nature of brands and branding which leads into a consideration of some of the unique aspects of online branding. Since Web pages have a significant role in online branding, the article reviews how Web site elements can be marshalled to communicate brand values and messages. Finally a model for the process associated with building online brands is proposed and discussed.

Brand basics

What is a brand?

A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination of these which is used to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors (Kotler *et al.*, 2002).

Alternatively, De Chernatony and McDonald (1992) describe a brand as:

... an identifiable product augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition.

This definition emphasises three aspects of a successful brand:

- (1) a brand is dependent on customer perception;
- (2) perception is influenced by the added-value characteristics of the product; and
- (3) the added value characteristics need to be sustainable.

This means, for example, that brand design, including the graphic design, the logo and the look associated with the brand do not create the brand, although they do help to accelerate recognition, and thereby speed up the branding process.

Brand names help the buyer by conveying a bundle of attributes about the product or service. This increases the buyer's confidence that they are making a satisfactory purchase, and increases their search efficiency. From the producer perspective, branding enables the supplier to attract a loyal customer base, it often means that the producer can set a higher price for goods branded under a reputable brand, and it helps the supplier to segment markets. A powerful brand has high brand equity, or in other words, it has high brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, strong brand associations and other assets such as patents, trademarks and channel relationships.

Brands have multiple levels of meaning. First and foremost, a brand is signified by a brand mark, and therefore has a basic function associated with recognition, and association. All documents, products and Web pages carrying a common brand mark can be seen to emanate from the same source. Brand marks when registered as trademarks may also be used to protect an entity. Brands can also deliver different levels of meaning. A brand may bring to mind certain product attributes, such as "organised", "durable", "reliable" and "pleasurable". A brand may also say something about buyers' values. For example, a buyer of a Mercedes may value high performance, safety and prestige. A brand may also convey personality. For example, consumers might visualise a Mercedes as a wealthy, middle-aged business executive. The brand will attract people whose actual or desired self images are congruent with that of the brand. In the online environment, the concept of brand as experience has been promoted. This concept of brand emphasises that the user's brand image is formed not just by a product and its attributes, or even values, but by the total experience that they associate with the brand. Importantly, given the multiple meanings that may be associated with the concept of brand, any one brand may be understood as a sign for recognition by one person, as a set of attributes or values by another, and as an experience by a third person. The brand is a complex symbol, and the challenge of branding is to develop a set of meanings or associations for the brand that can resonate with the variety of different perspectives that consumers might adopt in formulating a brand image.

Branding in a digital age

Some argue that brands will become less important in the digital age, and others argue

that increased information availability will lead customers to seek best value, irrespective of brand. It may be that branding may become less important for low value, frequently purchased commodities, but continue to be important for high value, infrequently purchased, highly differentiated items. Perhaps the question for the information industry is exactly how the role of brands will develop in this sector in the digital age. The discussion of branding in a digital age can be explored from two related perspectives; organisational strategy and brand experience.

Brand builders are challenged by the tools at their disposal for online branding. Issues and opportunities include the following.

The message capacity of Web pages

Web pages do not allow much scope for communicating messages as well as information about an organisation, and how to start navigating a site. Not only is the overall screen size for a home page relatively limited, but Web pages need to be designed to accommodate the different generations of technology that might be available to individual users. This includes variations in the speed of downloading of graphics, screen resolutions, number of colours, and the types of browser used. The answer is to enlist all of the components of the Web site in marketing communication, as discussed below, to make the brand message integral, rather than an add-on. Mobile technologies with very much smaller screens present an even more interesting challenge.

Brands as search keys

In a crowded Internet marketplace, the role of the brand symbol has reasserted itself. A unique brand name has an important role to play as a keyword in the search process. Unique brands that are well known and are not generic terms can be very effective as key words used with search engines. Even more important is the link between domain name and brand. Consistency between domain name and brand name can reinforce familiarity with the brand, and strengthen the message links between channels. Not all organisations have been successful in achieving priority on the domain brand that aligns most closely with their brand. For example, General Motors does not own the domain name www.generalmotors.com, although it does own and use www.gm.com. Ward and Lee (2000) found that consumers used brand names as substitutes for product information when they made online purchase decisions.

Integration of branding and marketing communication across different channels

In commercial environments, there is evidence to suggest that it is difficult to communicate an

online brand in the absence of preconceptions already established through other channels. Many of the early dotcoms failed because they needed to establish presence and reputation quickly and the huge marketing budgets that this required undermined their financial stability. Some organisations choose to migrate established brands online, e.g. tesco.com and CNN.com; others took the opportunity to create a unique and fresh identity online, e.g. smile.co.uk. There are also a limited number of successful online brands, such as Amazon.com, Yahoo.com, and Google.com. A key agenda has been to balance the need to protect and not corrupt established brands as established organisations enter risky “new marketplaces” whilst leveraging the brand equity of existing brands. In other words the issue has been to create a sense of “the same credibility, but a different presentation”. For example, at the symbolic level, Barnes & Noble achieved this by retaining the offline parent brand Barnes & Noble, but launched using the same name, but in a different presentation, barnesandnoble.com.

The earlier click vs. brick debate has now been replaced by a recognition that businesses need to take a new look at their channels” strategies, and to understand both the service and the marketing communication that customers want delivered through each channel, and to develop a robust multi-channel strategy. One perspective is to argue that it is necessary to integrate messages, but differentiate experience. One approach to differentiation is being trialed by Sony with their demonstration stores in which customers can experience products, but not purchase; purchase is online. In this type of differentiation demonstration stores focus on offering the whole body experience that engages consumers” senses, including feeling, smelling and tasting, and leads to an emotional (rather than a rational) commitment. In this scenario, an online channel is designed to offer factual arguments, transactions, basic support and ready 24 hour point of contact through and beyond the purchase process.

Unique organisational value proposition (UVP)

There is an increasing interest in corporate branding, and the associated concept of UVP. UVP is replacing the concept of the unique selling proposition (USP), which tends to align with products and product features, and thereby leads to the proliferation of brands. UVP, on the other hand, is based on processes and values that work across an industry. For example, Virgin sells across air travel, financial services and soft drinks, through identifying processes that work across all of these industries, and embracing and delivering on values such as transparency, integrity and service. Some marketers would argue that in the online environment organisations need to move on to the Me Selling

Proposition (MSP), which conceptualises brand as the property of individual consumers rather than of the manufacturer or retailer. Under the Me Selling Proposition, the consumer feels ownership of the brand, and responds to an obligation to protect and develop the brand.

Linking and developing brand positions

The Internet can be used to make links between separately branded products more obvious, and to bring together endorser brands. Library Web sites are a prime example of such linking between brands. For example, through my university Web site, I have access to services branded under names such as Firstsearch, Web of Knowledge, JSTOR, Ingenta, and SpringerLINK. Leitch and Richardson (2003) discuss the concept of the brand Web. They argue that in the new economy with the convergence of technology, and industry sectors, as well as the merger of existing companies and the development of alliances and networks within and between industry sectors, brands do not stand alone. It is important to manage the network of relationships between brands.

Public sector branding

With the increasing marketisation of the public sector, many public sector organisations are embracing a wider range of marketing approaches. There is a growing awareness that branding is important, but there is less of an agreement as to how branding of public sector organisations can be achieved. For example, a recent Financial Times article indicated that in many European countries government departments are imposing or adopting a consistent approach to branding across all sections and initiatives, but remarked on the lack of any evidence of a systemic approach across government departments and agencies in the UK (Fry, 2003). A coordinated approach allows the establishment of strong brands leading to brands that can act as umbrella brands for a range of activities and initiatives, including those that are both stable and time-limited. In addition to the challenge of the size and range of activities of many public sector organisations, the other challenge in formulating a distinctive brand is often the diversity of the customer group and target audience. Marketing theory and practice emphasises the value of segmentation in formulating and communicating market offerings. Many, although not all public sector organisations serve a very wide community, or what marketers might describe as a mass market, and this presents special challenges.

Globalisation

Web sites are globally accessible; the Internet has made worldwide branding possible, and indeed, whatever targeting marketers may intend for an

online brand, the Web site will be seen by other audiences. Language, symbols and colours often do not translate across different countries and culture. Branding may be world wide, but preferences are local. Global brands have sought to identify with values that are common to many communities such as safety, style and status and service, but these need to be represented in different ways in different national contexts. The general issue is that the actual audience for online brands is less predictable and more diverse than the brand audience encountered through many other channels.

The experience of the brand

The digital environment has, it has been argued, changed the dynamic between the organisation and its customers in a number of ways; all of these changes may impact on the experience of the brand.

Customers have greater control over marketing communication

Customers no longer wait for leaflets or media presentations to come to them; they cease to be passive consumers of information, and instead become proactive prosumers, and may take the initiative in soliciting information from organisations. The concept of permission marketing (Godin, 1999) in which organisations seek the permission of customers prior to sending direct e-mail or other communication is a response that allows customers greater control over their relationship with an organisation. The brand experience is determined by the customer, and may be different for each customer.

Customisation and customer relationships

Internet interaction, and other channels of interaction with customers often provide businesses (and some public sector organisations) with the opportunity to gather customer data into large data warehouses. This data can be used to segment customers and to design specific offerings to specific segments, or even to interact with the customer on a one-to-one basis (one-to-one marketing). Customisation and targeting to smaller groups may generate diversity of experience with a brand, and lead to the brand meaning different things to different groups, or alternatively to the proliferation of a range of brands.

A help yourself medium

Customers engage in self-service, and whilst the provider may have control over some elements of the service experience, other elements are entirely under the control of the customer, and the design of the total experience is also constructed by the customer. For example, a

customer who does not use the most effective search facilities for their search may be less satisfied with the outcome than the customer who has learnt effective searching skills, can enter personal and order detail in registration and order forms efficiently, and is generally confident with the digital resources that they are accessing and the processes that they need to undertake to access those resources. The brand experience may be more positive for experienced Internet and information users than for the newcomer. Overall switching may be discouraged and customer commitment promoted, but there is a real challenge associated with attracting and inducting newcomers into a brand community.

Service orientation

Many online merchants are taking the opportunity offered by the Internet to convert products into service experiences. Amazon, for example, does not just sell books; it adds considerable value through information based service elements such as ratings, reviews, excerpts, categorisations, recommendations, and communities of interest. The term infobrand has been coined to describe brands that blur the boundary between information and promotion. For example, retailers of health products (such as Boots) offer online health advice as part of their online service, contextualising promotions for their products within general advice.

M-commerce

M-commerce has the potential to change brand experience radically. With m-commerce the brand builder can know where customers are at any time, and has the opportunity to send customised messages that are consistent not only with the customer's profile, but also with their location. For example, if they are about to enter a store that sells televisions, a targeted message can be communicated to the customer in that location. In this situation, the brand message needs to be targeted to the here and now, and communicated in a "sound bite".

Web site elements that communicate brand values and messages

Web sites communicate messages about the brand through both their design and functionality. Many library and information Web sites reveal a preoccupation with functionality, and the traditional emphasis on access to, and the organisation of, information and services. At the lower levels in a university library Web site it is not unusual to find that library jargon and complex and lengthy help systems that demand a level of reading on screen that most users would find uncomfortable. Whilst help is always welcome, every effort should be made to avoid

retrieval routes that are complex and indirect. Attention to system design will eliminate the need to reflect the system complexity in the design of the Web site. In addition to making electronic access to resources more straightforward, this will create more scope to increase the "volume" and "resolution" of other messages.

Brand values and messages are communicated through a number of elements of the Web site. These include the following.

Logo

The logo is the shorthand for everything that the brand stands for. It should be displayed on the home page, and anywhere else on the site where it adds value. It can remind a user of the provenance of the site, and its recurrence in several locations on the site will help to fix the logo in the customer's mind.

Graphics

Graphics includes pictures, logos, and other images. What pictures show indicates the content and nature of the service. Pictures are a visual representation of brand values. Books, people and computers are common images on library Web sites. Are these the most effective images, or are other images that reflect authority, trust, or leisure pursuits more appropriate? One of the very real challenges here is that for many people, information in whatever form is merely a channel to other activities, such as writing an essay, learning, canoeing, gardening, health, or enhancing the success of a business enterprise. How can this be captured by the pictures on a library Web site? Animation of images can give a sense of movement and dynamism, but too much movement can be irritating and confusing.

Text and copy

Text and copy sets the tone of voice, and determines whether a message is intelligent, comprehensible and relevant. Text helps to define the brand's personality, and to reinforce brand values consistently. Text is the site talking to the customer; the words determine what it says; the typeface determines the style of the communication. As well as communicating a welcome to users, and inviting them into the site, text needs to echo the thoughts that the user brings to the site. In this context, there is a world of difference between: "Do you need news stories – try Lexis/Nexis" and "Lexis/Nexis is a database that provides access to the latest news".

Currency and news

Currency is important. It communicates a live and dynamic Web site, an organisation that is interested in ensuring that users have access to the latest information. Currency is particularly important to those Web sites that claim to deliver the latest information or news, and also to those sites that users visit on a regular basis. Users need new information to encourage them to

revisit, and whilst regular users of a site may be resistant to changes in navigational arrangements, they seek messages that confirm that the site is being updated. Does the Web site look like “today’s” Web site, or “yesterday’s” Web site? How is currency conveyed?

Colour

Colours often have culturally defined messages associated with them. What do the colours of the Web site communicate about values? What colour is a library and information service, or should it clothe itself in the corporate colours of its parent organisation? Even shades of the same colour, such as light blue, royal blue and navy blue may communicate different messages. The use of colours in combination, in blocks, in pictures or applied to text can have an impact on the overall “look” of the Web page. Care should be taken to ensure that pictures are used carefully, to avoid detracting from a consistent colour message.

Shapes

What do shapes say? Shapes are used in many ways on Web sites, including shapes of pictures or graphics, shapes of buttons and shapes of menu option displays. Even small features such as round corners on menu boxes instead of square corners may communicate a difference of style and approach to service. The choice of typeface and its consistency with other shapes is also an important feature. Many commercial brands use a word or two in their brand mark or logo, and the shape, colour and style of the logo will set a design style that needs to be echoed elsewhere on the site.

Layout and combination of images

The overall layout of a Web page can be used as a metaphor. The CNN Web page, for example, is arranged in columns to simulate a print newspaper. The Disney home page uses the metaphor of a village, consistent with the concept of Disneyland. Portals and other information intensive sites have a very real challenge in organising as many access points and banner advertisements as possible on one screen. This can leave them looking like a jumble sale of messages, with too many different colours and shapes (sometimes inherited from the brand marks of their partners), and the loss of a clear branding for the portal itself.

Relationship features

Relationship features is a general term for those features and functions of the Web site that take the user beyond the home page and its initial impact. The Web site experience builds the brand experience. Experience features include the speed of site load, navigation, and response in any communication or interaction. Functions that encourage return visits to the site include e-mail, chat rooms, new information, special offers and community.

Building an online brand

Managers need to take a systematic approach to the development of brands in the online marketplace. A model for an online brand development process is proposed, and its stages are discussed below. It is however important to remember that this model focuses on what the business can do to build the brand. Ultimately, a brand is only as good as the brand image that it generates in the minds of consumers. Brand marks can be seen as representative of the accumulated experience of the brand; a brand mark evokes memories of previous brand experiences. The task for the brand builder is to tease out and communicate brand values that take the organisation where it wants to go, whilst acknowledging and building on any existing values, attributes or personality traits that existing users associate with the organisation. In the sense that all brands are dynamic they must provide leadership, and not just echo how they are currently perceived. On the other hand their message must be initially credible and ultimately deliverable.

Setting the context for the brand

Any brand mark, such as that for a public or an academic library needs to be designed taking into account, and possibly echoing, the corporate brand. Values embedded in the corporate brand need to be translated into the library brand, but interpreted to match the unique services offered by the library, and the values associated with that service that are shared by library managers and their staff. Public libraries are part of a local authority. Academic libraries are part of a university or college. Another important element of context is any other existing brands that the library has used. A new online branding initiative may provoke a review of offline brands. Certainly managers need to be able to identify elements of consistency and elements of differentiation between offline and online modes. The values embraced and communicated offline should be echoed in online channels. So offline values such as friendliness of staff, relaxed atmosphere, space for study, helpful signage, informative help desk, attractive displays and environment may be represented online through friendly tone of voice, simple site, uncluttered, easy navigation, similar colour palette to that in the library building, and helpful e-mail contact points.

Deciding on brand objectives and message

Marketing communications across all media need to deliver a consistent message. This message may relate to the purpose of the library, a set of values, or even be an encapsulation of the personality of the organisation.

The first stage is to understand what that message might be, focussing on the concept of brand as a set of values. Brand values must

match the values that customers seek in using information services and products. Each information providing organisation will have a different potential customer base, and will need to build brand values accordingly. Values must both resonate with existing and potential customers, as well as representing a promise on which the organisation has the capacity to deliver. Values can be elicited by surveys and other approaches that collect data from existing stakeholders, including existing and potential customers, staff, and managers.

Coupled with the definition of message is the matter of objectives. What makes a successful online brand depends upon the library's objectives when conducting online branding. Some possible objectives of online branding might be to:

- raise awareness of online and offline services;
- encourage a higher level of use;
- enhance the effectiveness of communication between users and the library;
- encourage more frequent visits to the Web site;
- encourage users to use a wider range of online services;
- get people to remember the brand mark; and
- change people's attitude to the library.

Developing a brand specification

In addition to the message other elements of the specification need to be identified. Specifically in the context of the brand mark, a brand mark needs to be recognisable, and memorable, visible and usable in different channels, including online, professionally printed promotions and photocopied and in-house communication.

Creating a brand design

Professional assistance through a designer or design agency is important in translating a specification into a design. This process should be interactive, with the designer making a range of proposals, and manager, staff and users having some structured input to the process of evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the design in communicating core messages.

Creating the Web site and other communications using the brand

Design the Web site to reinforce and communicate a brand. Messages emanate from all elements of a Web site, as discussed earlier. Whilst effective Web site design remains important in terms of usability, the central focus in the branding process is on communication and messages.

Launching and promoting the brand

Once the Web site with its brand mark and other branding elements has been designed it needs to

be launched. In addition to simply making the Web site available, it is important to continue building brand presence offline, through, for example, publicity, launch events, and word-of-mouth in training seminars.

Building the brand experience

Once the brand is launched, interaction through those activities associated with the brand, including ease of navigation of the Web site, value of pointers to external information resources, extent and ease of access to full text of periodical articles, and responsiveness and relevance of help-desk support, all contribute to building the brand experience. One very real challenge for libraries is to ensure that services, such as collections of electronic journals to which they provide access, and which have their own distinct unique branding position, do not undermine or qualify the library brand through different images, and symbolism, or through the more pragmatic aspects of the experience associated with search, navigation and access arrangements.

Reviewing, evolving and protecting the brand

Library and other public sector brands are unlikely to find their brand being emulated and used to sell t-shirts. Nevertheless, monitoring and control of the use of the brand, both at the level of its use in corporate communications, and the interaction between the use of online and offline presentations of the brand, and the associations that users are building with the brand is an important component in evaluating marketing communications, and more widely the success of the library in engaging with its audience. Annual or biennial audits of how the brand is applied and how it is perceived yield important information for brand evolution. Above all else, no serious brand builder leaves their brand to languish unnoticed, whilst technology, services, customers and the environment change around it.

Conclusion

Online branding is at an interesting point of development. Many organisations recognise the need for integrated marketing communications across offline and online channels. This makes it difficult to differentiate, both practically and theoretically between online and offline branding. On the other hand, branding in online environments poses a sufficient range of challenges and opportunities that it is important to shine the spotlight on branding in digital environments, and to explore some of the potential impacts of online channels for branding strategy. Online environments are by

their nature information based service environments. Conceptualisations of brand as experience emphasise at the very least that brand is built not by what an organisation says, as by what it does, and further, by how the user experiences what it does. Library and information services are increasingly delivering their services digitally and remotely. This new medium and channel has the potential to free the library of the legacy of some of the less than positive and forward looking images that some users may hold, but only if the opportunity is recognised and embraced.

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