

# Brands Begin By Believing

*"In recent times, there's been a tendency to refer to us as 'the Disney brand.' Branding is something you do to cows....Branding is what you do when there's nothing original about your product." Roy Disney, as quoted in The Wall Street Journal, March 4, 2004*

**T**hese words should send chills down the spine of all of us who work in strategic branding. Here's the heir to the most potent story-telling empire in the world dismissing a craft that is all about story-telling. One look at our balance

sheets over the last year shows that Roy isn't the only corporate chieftain who thinks all this talk about branding is, well, a little goofy.

And no wonder. Rarely, if ever, has our business clearly articulated just what branding is, how it's done, and why anyone should do it.

Well, here goes—let's start with what branding is not: Branding is not advertising, logo design, corporate identity, or any of the many marketing disciplines with which it is closely associated. (The confusion is understandable, given branding's critical role in the success of these activities.) Strip away the buzzwords and self-serving talk of proprietary processes and strategic branding is simply and powerfully this: story-telling. Corporate story-telling. Industrial poetry.

Strategic branding identifies and articulates a company's core promise. The promise it holds out to itself, customers, investors, employees, business partners and stakeholders. Said another way, branding helps a company figure out who it is, what it's all about, and what role its character (read, brand) plays in that larger drama called the marketplace.

This story, commonly called a brand promise or positioning, must have a compelling answer to the questions: What does the company stand for? How is it distinctive? Why should anyone care?

Answering these questions demands a thoughtful, thorough and honest examination of a firm's people, history, goals, achievements and failures, as well as the marketplace and competition. (Bonus: the internal dialogue is nearly as valuable as the final strategic product.) Creating a distinctive, enduring brand positioning also requires intellectual rigor, business smarts, creativity, communication skills, and, on numerous occasions, yelling and screaming (out of client earshot, of course.)

The result is the key, but by no means the only deliverable of any branding assignment, the positioning statement. Part

mythos, part manifesto, part marching orders, a good positioning statement is full of strategic insight, intellectual heft and dynamic story-telling.

And why shouldn't it be, it's the story of your company, a vital combination of documentary and inspiring narrative. And, when fully leveraged, this

brand positioning is nothing less than a guide for everything a company does and says, and how it does and says them.

A brand's positioning is also crucial to a wide range of overarching business strategies. The kind of company you are, the things you believe, and the promises you make lays the framework for mergers, acquisitions and new business initiatives. And that's just the beginning. If it seems like a lot to expect from a story, from just words on paper, remember this: These words are the idea that animates your company. The permission for those inside and outside to believe.

And you don't have to be Roy Disney to know that, more than anything, we want something to believe in. Strategic branding can make your company that something.



John C. Lund/spot

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