

# TAKING DOWN THE SIGN...

Would anyone recognize you?

A discussion guide on the inherent  
power of the brand  
(Hint: and it's not about marketing!)

A BUSINESS COMMENTARY



Edelman Change and  
Employee Engagement

With all of today's talk about "brand," one would think we're in a Golden Age of superior service, fulfilled expectations and endless possibilities for companies, customers and employees.

Unfortunately, "brand" has become an overused buzz word, and as is often the case with buzz words, it's losing its true meaning. This presents a semantic (and substantive) challenge for communicators, as brand development and communications have too often become euphemisms for a new logo, new advertising, sloganeering and superficial promises, with little or no consideration given to the actual substance or intent behind those efforts.

The reality of "brand" is more complicated and demands a more sophisticated approach. A well-conceived brand transcends signs and slogans. It reflects who we are, not simply what we say or what we look like. Brand refers to not only our products, but to our entire corporate entity, as well. The signs and slogans are only physical manifestations of our company's core. It's up to us as communicators to help define the underlying substance. It's up to us to recognize that brand is conveyed by actions and behaviors, not marketing and messages.

Ask yourself: if you took down all of your "signs" — removed your logo from your stationery, your name from your ads and your sign from your buildings — would people inside and outside of your organization still know who you are, and what you stand for? Or, is your brand only skin deep?

## A personal journey

The meaning of “brand” hit me a few years ago, as I visited a Grand Union grocery store near my home. My family shopped there regularly for 15 years because we were always impressed with the freshness of its produce, the quality of its meats and the smiles of its staff. But, over time, the selections became less varied, and the physical space paled in comparison to those of newer competitive stores.

We were tempted to switch to a new store, but found ourselves going back to Grand Union until it eventually went out of business. What *was* it that attracted us? Why did we keep going back?

As I drove by and looked in the vacated store it suddenly hit me. Grand Union wasn’t just about the expectations I had for the products it sold. While products are important, I managed to get by without the larger selection that competitor stores offered. And it wasn’t about the company’s pithy slogan or advertising copy. What I could not get by without was the unique atmosphere, friendliness and coziness that the store, through its people, had delivered.

Grand Union delivered these things so well, in fact, that I gave it the benefit of the doubt when it became clear it was struggling. That kind of brand loyalty probably kept Grand Union in business longer than would otherwise have been the case. The failure of this store is not that management failed to keep up with the brand, but that the brand finally exhausted the benefit of the trust its employees were willing to give it.

Right there was the answer. Brand is not about *what* a company is...brand is about *who* a company is.

*Gary F. Grates  
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**“Brand is our least tangible, yet most valuable asset.”**

— Owen D. Young,  
Former Chairman, General Electric

As communicators, we already know the importance of brand, right?

After all, ever since Marketing 101 and Effective Management 1-A, it’s been steadily drummed into us that a strong, effective brand increases awareness, customer loyalty, sales, repeat sales, employee retention and even shareholder value.

But how well do we really understand the concept of brand? How effectively do we incorporate that understanding into our daily behaviors?

Effective, lasting brands aren’t built by accident. Building and sustaining a successful brand may well be one of the most difficult and important challenges facing a company today.

How, then, do communicators contribute to building an effective brand? The answer involves how we communicate both inside and outside the organization, and more importantly how we truly comprehend the meaning of a brand, and how we translate that *knowledge* into language, attitude and behavior.

### **Can’t touch this**

We often think of a corporate brand as a company’s public face — be it a logo, a product or an ad — something a person can touch or see.

That’s the first mistake.

We need to stop thinking of brand as a *thing*. Brand is not something we can see, smell, hear, taste or touch.

Brand is the sum of the entire organization — its values, systems, policies, decisions, operating principles, work environments and more. Brand is determined by how we conduct ourselves each day, and *not* by some corporate edict from above. It's about behaviors, not “messages.”

To the consumer, investor or onlooker, brand exists solely in the mind. Brand is the result of constituents interaction with your people, products and services. How do your products and services make them feel? How does interacting with your employees impact their perception of your company? What motivates them to purchase? What makes them want to come back? Do they view your offerings differently from those of competitors? Why? Do they view buying from you as a relationship or merely a transaction?

An effective brand doesn't simply distinguish a company or a product from its competitors. It builds a *lasting relationship* with people. It influences, motivates and drives them. Brand is nothing more than the emotional feelings and responses a company engenders in people.

### **Is brand actually less important today?**

Many people argue that in the age of the Internet and global economies, brand matters less. They say products and even companies become commoditized as people inevitably gravitate toward the lowest price.

I couldn't disagree more. I believe that the increasing number of choices and options facing consumers and investors makes brand more important... *not* less. Any company that doesn't believe this will learn the hard way.

Look at it this way: would you rather buy a book from a familiar, trusted brand such as Amazon.com or from an unknown brand such as Joesbooks.com? Who would you rather give your credit card information to? Who will you trust to deliver your shipment on a timely basis? Who do you believe will do a better job of guaranteeing quality and accepting the return of an unsatisfactory item?

Is this peace of mind worth an extra buck? I believe most people would vote “yes” — with their pocketbooks.

### **We are what we eat. And drink. And drive.**

As society diversifies, consumer brands become more important because they increasingly define who we are. We are no longer solely defined, (as we once were) by such demographic factors as: neighborhood, ethnicity, age, education or occupation. The average worker today changes careers far more frequently than in previous generations. Neighborhoods are not the distinctive and unifying communities they once were. Even ethnicity is becoming increasingly blurred as we move toward a more multi-racial society.

Today, we are often defined by what we consume. We're Cadillac-driving, Calloway-swinging, Absolut-sippers, while our teenagers are Sprite-drinking, Nike-wearing, iPod-listeners. And a whole set of characteristics and expectations are associated with these descriptions.

Today's brands speak far less about the characteristics and functionality of products than they used to. Remember the durability of Craftsmen Tools or the cleaning power of Ajax? Brand now often symbolizes more about what your product represents to the consumer in terms of lifestyle and aspiration. In this regard, brand makes an emotional

connection, helping a person (or group of people) project how they want to be viewed.

However, once one gets past the emotional connection, the rational side kicks in — this happens when brand becomes a legitimate choice based on more tangible factors, such as differentiated products or services or quality, a track record of performance and the demonstrable benefits of the brand.

### **Begin at the beginning**

What *is* a brand? As mentioned earlier, it's far more than the sign on your door or name on your products.

**A corporate brand is a set of implied promises you make to people who encounter your company about what they should expect from their interaction with you.**

Dropping off a UPS package means never having to worry about when or if it will arrive at its destination. People know that a Big Mac and fries will taste the same in Prague or Peoria, and can expect that it will be served in an equally clean restaurant. Nordstrom shoppers carry their packages home knowing that any problems will be dealt with efficiently, expeditiously and courteously. Why? Because that promise holds true every time they shop there.

Certainly, a corporate brand represents what a company sells and how a company acts. More importantly, brand represents who a company is — the summation of the people who work for it every day. Because, at the end of the day, the only people who can “keep” the brand promise are the ones responsible for bringing it to life.

What *isn't* a brand? The following are three common misconceptions:

### 1. Identity is brand.

It isn't. "Identity" is often used synonymously with brand, but brand goes far deeper. When an organization can find its center of gravity (the point at which its actions and its image are one) then it can achieve longevity, prosperity and reputation. Think General Electric. Land's End. IBM.

### 2. Brand is about "what we do."

No, brand is "who and what we are." Yes, what you do (or don't do) certainly contributes to people's sense of what you are. But, there's more to brand than that. Brand represents the core of the organization — the beliefs, philosophies, visions and values. Brand is translated through many channels including products, services, policies and missions. Think Johnson & Johnson.

### 3. Brand is about "what we say."

Brand is about an organization's actions, choices, investments, programs, products and services, among other things. It is here that consumers, employees, influencers and prospects determine who you are and what they can expect. Think PepsiCo. Starbucks.

You don't "create" a brand; you find it (intentionally and systematically) from the inside out. And like finding anything else, it requires planning, commitment, adequate resources, performance and a strong foundation. It also requires that the communications function be involved from the outset in all strategy development and planning, both to reflect the concerns of all constituencies as well as to weigh in on the language and concepts used to articulate the brand.

It also demands that a company cultivate operating philosophies and values that meaningfully permeate through the entire organization.

Ritz-Carlton guests anywhere in the world can expect the highest-quality services and treatment from *everyone* they come into contact with, from the parking attendant, to the doorman, to the front desk clerk. Why? Because Ritz-Carlton's "promise" is a personal point of pride for every employee. You can be fairly certain that Ritz-Carlton's communicators and other managers strive to reflect that promise in all of their communications, both internal and external.

### **Questions, questions, questions**

When developing a new product, the process generally begins with a lot of questions: What are the opportunities? What are our customers needs? What is or is not being done to meet those needs? What are our core competencies? Do we have the resources to launch and support this? Do we have the internal capacity for design, manufacturing, fulfillment and advertising, or will we have to outsource it? What do we want to know from research? *What will it take for us to succeed and to sustain success?*

Like so many other strategic initiatives, branding first requires a thorough understanding of where the company is before we can decide where the company needs to go — or how it will get there. Planning means knowing how the company fits within its current environment.

How well do you understand your customers? Why do they buy your products? How often? What are the perceived benefits? What does your brand stand for? If brand indeed

represents a set of promises, what promises does your brand represent? What gaps are there between who *you* say you are and who your *customers* say you are? What else do your employees need to know or do?

*Who are you when your sign comes down? Who do you want to be?*

In a sense, we don't really communicate in order to sell products. We're selling — and building — a brand or a promise. If we fail at that, the effectiveness of our communications is compromised at best or a moot point at worst.

Think about it. Does anyone but perhaps a world-class athlete really perform better in Nike shoes? Do Tostitos really make your party more festive? Any beverage can quench your thirst. But asking a loyal PepsiCo or Budweiser drinker to switch their preferred beverage is like asking them to betray their country.

What consumers (knowingly or unknowingly) are really buying is the brand experience conveyed.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The customer may be the ultimate test of brand. But that's not where brand begins.

### **It's what's on the inside that counts**

Beauty may be only skin deep, but brand goes all the way to the core of a business.

We often think of brand in terms of its impact on the customer. The customers are, after all, the people who buy our products and services and generate our revenue. The customer is the most visible part of the brand experience but brand, paradoxically, is not primarily an external force.

Brand begins on the inside.

Remember, brand is a reflection of an entire company, not just its products. Companies are made up of the structures, processes and most importantly, the people who design, build, distribute, service, market, promote and sell products, handle the paperwork, clean warehouses and keep the computers working. The ability to maintain those competencies, and add value to them through people, intellectual capital, technology and other assets, enables companies to connect with their customers.

A company's beliefs and brand values must be embraced by every employee. If they don't live the brand, the brand cannot live. They are its embodiment. Their every action shapes and gives life to the brand. Whether it's the crisp efficiency of a UPS delivery person, or the empathetic understanding of a Nordstrom customer service person, they are fulfilling the promise of their brands.

It's not just the people on the front lines, either. Brand is every receptionist, operator, accounting professional, financial professional, designer, salesman and engineer. Brand influences everyone an organization comes into contact with, from customers to employees to shareholders to vendors. In short, brand is everyone's business, not just that of the CEO, the communications vice president or even the marketing manager.

If it seems unlikely that even behind-the-scenes people impact brand, consider the following hypothetical: you're attending a professional sporting event, looking forward to rooting for your favorite team. But, when you get there, the parking lot is poorly lit, the restrooms are dirty, the

concessions are tasteless and your seat is broken. Even though the part of the brand that you “rationally” care about (the players) may perform at the highest level, isn’t it likely that your feelings about the *organization* might somehow suffer? Might you not be somewhat more likely to consider going to a concert or a movie the next time you go out?

What created these negative impressions? Not the game itself. Not the players you “know.” And not the team’s logo or slogan. No, it was *people you didn’t even see, and had probably never thought about.*

### Case study: Apple



Apple has had more lives than even the feistiest cat. Its saving grace has typically been a customer-friendly computer system that maintains a cult-like following because of the experience it creates for the user.

The iPod, however, has taken the Apple brand to a new level. Since its introduction, this portable music player has sold like proverbial hotcakes and generated waves of positive publicity. Apple’s stock price and quarterly earnings have soared as a result, and even its computers have generated new interest in what is arguably the result of an iPod “halo effect.”

The real potential victory for Apple, though, is that the iPod has become the embodiment for what Apple is: *Innovation. Sleekness. Elegance.* A pristine consumer experience, as evidenced by the company’s showrooms. The organization is aligned to achieve a specific brand standard and promise.

The ramification is that Apple is able to shape the attributes and success of the iPod to evolve the personality of its overall brand. A broader, global audience now views Apple

as cool, trendy and desirable — creating an opportunity for the company to garner interest in its computers and other products. Or, looked at from another perspective, the success of the iPod now gives Apple employees a renewed sense of who they are. The expectations of Apple's brand are so high that the new iPhone was a hit months before it was available.

### **Keep it simple**

What defines a brand? Can it be summed up easily?

Apple's corporate vision speaks clearly and simply to the values of its brand. It speaks from the heart, not from a committee. Similarly, Altoids' values are clear to consumers. Its offbeat wackiness doesn't come off as a corporation with a novel marketing plan or advertising pitch.

If a company needs to distribute an internal memo to convey what its corporate brand stands for, it has already lost. Can your brand be summed up in one sentence that avoids corporate speak? Or better yet, can it be summed up in one word? You can't expect employees to live the brand if they can't understand or explain it.

It's important to avoid clichéd words like “quality” or “effective” in defining brand. These terms are overused and mean different things to different people. Besides, quality and effectiveness are part of the cost-of-entry for doing business. And for heaven's sake, no world-class brand has ever been built using the words “end-to-end” or “solutions.”

Here are some brand do's, don'ts and determinations communicators must make to build their brands:

- ◆ *Don't* use the word “brand” when communicating to employees and customers. Brand is reflected in how we act. Truly, your actions will speak louder than your words. You can't simply talk about the brand — you must “be” it and live it, every day.
- ◆ *Don't* position or introduce brand as a “solution” for current problems. This could compromise the credibility of both the brand and the company. Remember, brand isn't a “thing.”
- ◆ *Do* introduce or revitalize brand in the overall context of the company's business. Take every relationship (internal and external) into consideration. The communication's function is uniquely qualified to take this holistic perspective.
- ◆ *Do* ensure that the CEO is the corporate brand champion: how the CEO lives and breathes the brand will determine its success or failure.
- ◆ *Determine* how people find, experience, see, value, discuss and rely on communications to ensure these things are consistent with who you want to be.
- ◆ *Determine* what kind of relationship management has with employees, and whether the dialogue is two-way or one-way. Do you have the right tools in place to facilitate that dialogue?

Never forget or underestimate the environment your brand operates in. At General Motors (GM), for example, the company wants the process of buying a Cadillac XLR to be an experience akin to purchasing a fine piece of jewelry or a fine piece of artwork. As such, the dealership experience (the true face of the GM corporate brand to consumers) is ultimately just as important as the product.

## Communicate frequently

So, how do you live our brands' values?

Communicating brand to employees is a daunting task. Simply ghostwriting a memo for a senior manager explaining the new brand strategy, or issuing an employee newsletter showing off a new company ad won't do the trick.

Many people talk about employee "awareness" of the brand. Awareness isn't enough: it's possible to be aware, but still not care. The first priority is for employees to *understand*, *embrace* and *believe* in the values of the brand, not just be informed about them. This will only happen if leadership lives the brand, and if business decisions and human resource policies reflect the brand's values. That takes time, passion, energy, consistency and effort. But, it's important, because you're asking employees to live a set of values that are supposed to represent the company, their role in the company and how the company interacts with people, customers, employees and investors alike.

Employees can't be expected to embrace a brand if no one is building a relationship with them.

Getting a copy of the annual report and a newsletter listing new executive hires may technically qualify as employee communications, but they don't do much to help employees understand what the corporate brand means to them — or what they mean to the brand.

Neither will telling employees what the brand is, or is going to be, in so many words and charts. Brand doesn't exist in a PowerPoint presentation or Word document. To live the brand, employees need to see, hear and feel what's going on outside their cubicles and workstations.

Fortunately for us as communicators, employees need to know and want to know this information. In an era of instant messaging, if we don't tell them, they'll find it out on Yahoo! message board or Raging Bull chat rooms, where they may be more likely to hear rumors and gossip than positive brand-building information.

### **The importance of storytelling**

It's not just the things the company is doing today that need to be communicated.

Behind every successful brand is a good story that underscores the philosophies, risks and actions of a visionary person.

Walk down the halls of the Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, and almost every person in the building can recite the tale of how pharmacist Dr. John Smith Pemberton first lugged jugs of his caramel-colored syrup down the 19<sup>th</sup> century streets of Atlanta to Jacobs' Pharmacy, where the fountain served up glasses mixed with soda for a nickel.

Every new McDonald's employee, from executive to fry cook, is immediately immersed in the tale of how MultiMixer salesman Ray Kroc built the world's largest foodservice retailer on the company's QSVK principles — quality, service, value and cleanliness.

Companies have histories — or, “stories.” And by telling these histories, people can feel and understand the mission, value and passion that have built, grown and sustained the company. Corporate brands reflect their company's heritage. With successful brands, the pride and emotion they generate are passed on to new employees like family heirlooms moving from generation to generation.

Do employees know the history of your company? Do you? Are you borrowing from that legacy to help find your brand today?

### **Finding your “center of gravity”**

If employees are to live and reflect your brand, and if your brand is in turn to both shape and reflect your company, communications and desired behaviors must start at the top. This is critical. All of the marketing and promotion in the world won't make employees buy into the idea that everyone shares a common mission to uphold the brand unless they see your managers — especially the CEO — living the brand every day.

Leading by example is rarely more important. During Ray Kroc's tenure, all McDonald's executives could boast that at one time in their careers they had worked behind the grill and the till. Many junior executives spent a month or more, not just observing franchises, but working at them alongside harried managers and teenage burger flippers. Kroc knew, this was the best way for newcomers to fully understand how the McDonald's QSV brand values play themselves out countless times every day with customers, franchisees and employees. It's this basic approach that has led the company through its morass and into a revitalized future.

### **Every word you say**

External communications such as news releases, company newsletters and ad campaigns are numerous enough, to be sure. Sometimes, it may seem that these and other routinely distributed communications are easily overlooked, becoming so much clutter and background amidst all of the other companies making largely the same kinds of announcements.

On an individual-effort basis, this can sometimes be true; not every piece of communications will be a “home run.” But that’s not the point. Yes, we all want our share of home runs, but communications are more about the cumulative impact of our efforts.

Collectively, every piece of information from Human Resources for new employees, every announcement from Finance on financial results, every bylined article from Engineering on design, every positive blog mentioning your company, every speech or interview by your executives or any interaction with one of your employees with someone from outside the company, is part of (and reinforces) your brand. They communicate what your company is doing, how it is doing it and with whom. They shape the public dialogue and belief about your company and send a clear message back to employees on your corporate “promise” to the world.

### **No quick fix**

As the value of corporate brand becomes increasingly understood (or misunderstood) from boardrooms to business schools, a growing tendency is for companies to view brand as a potential quick fix to reverse any number of business maladies.

“Competitor X has a great brand — let’s get one too!” This can be an all-too-common battle cry. Market share dropping? Market cap down? Initiate a new brand strategy! Or, even worse, a new name or logo!

Not too long ago, companies were rushing to rebrand their companies as something dot-com. Even older, established companies such as K-tel and SkyMall saw their stock prices skyrocket as they recast themselves as savvy, new economy companies. The companies and their stock quickly came

crashing back to earth as people understood that they were still the same old companies that they were before, with the same old strengths and weaknesses. Without a complete brand strategy, rebranding can be little more than throwing a new coat of paint on an old car — eventually, the car breaks down anyway.

Brand is not an afterthought, something to be sprinkled on top of an already-baked business plan. It requires a considerable and constant effort.

Brand is not something that can be achieved by merely ordering up a splashy new ad campaign, or slapping a logo on the side of a NASCAR racecar. The corporate brand should be treated like any other major corporate initiative. It requires its own strategy, dedication, commitment, resources and personnel.

It's easy to take bold, decisive action in the name of brand building. But are the efforts being properly channeled? An ad campaign, for example, needs to build awareness for the brand, not just for the ad itself.

The real lesson is that brand is not a marketing campaign. Marketing supports the brand, not vice versa.

## Case study: McDonald's



McDonald's is a role model for how to dramatically reinvigorate a brand. A few years ago, a survey showed that McDonald's ranked 22 out of 25 fast-food chains for order accuracy. That was symbolic of several failures, many pertaining to its food. McDonald's lost sight of what its customers wanted, and the brand suffered.

Fortunately for McDonald's, new leadership recognized that the company had strayed from the brand promise — its QSVC principles. A new CEO vowed a return to basics, and a commitment to being true to its own center of gravity. No glitz and no glamour. The company brought back the old Big Mac secret sauce recipe. It cut back on spiraling growth, so it could get existing stores up to standard. It reduced investments in technology that didn't directly impact the customer. And, above all else, it reinvigorated the “hospitality experience,” with an emphasis on employee education.

The result? McDonald's is flying high again. Its most recent introductions have been relevant to customers, and Wall Street is excited again. The key, though, is that the company strives to stay true to its values everyday, never wanting to stray again from the principles that made McDonald's a great company to begin with.

### “Got brand?”

Every company likes to think it has a unique and effective brand. But a business can be successful and still not be maximizing the benefits of its brand. As former General Electric (GE) Chairman Owen Young said, it's not unusual for the corporate brand to be a company's most valuable, yet most easily overlooked asset.

Protecting or building an effective brand involves a constant process of self-evaluation. Here are a few questions you must ask and answer:

- ◆ Who are we *today*?
- ◆ Who do we *say* we are?
- ◆ If there's a gap between those two things, *why* is that the case?
- ◆ How is senior management's behavior reinforcing (or detracting from) our brand?
- ◆ Do we encourage the kind of internal dialogue and debate that optimizes our performance and brand consistency?
- ◆ What are our employees thinking, believing and saying? How about our customers? The media? Are we even in the habit of asking them?
- ◆ Are our communications strengthening our brand? Are we communicating the right things?
- ◆ Who do our competitors say they are? Has that changed?
- ◆ Do our capital products and other investments strengthen our brand promise?
- ◆ Regardless of who we say we are or who we actually are, who do we *need* to be?

You may not have all of the answers right away. But, as a bridge between the internal and external communities, communicators are uniquely positioned to get to the answers to all of these questions.

## Case study: UPS



UPS has long been a global leader in the package delivery business. A few years ago, management was concerned that the business had become increasingly commoditized by the success of competitors such as FedEx and the US Postal Service.

UPS management stepped back and took a holistic look at its business. By critically viewing how it interacted with customers and what its customers needed to accomplish, UPS recognized that it could create additional value by helping customers manage their flow of money and information. Because, viewed broadly, UPS was also an airline, an IT company, a telecommunications company, a freight forwarder and a logistics company. All of which led it to redefine itself as a global supply chain management business.

From there, the company did what most companies would do: refined its infrastructure, created new groups and hired people with new skill sets. Yet, UPS recognized that its employees needed to understand the new UPS universe, and their role in representing it to the customer base. Among other initiatives, UPS management partnered “traditional” employees with new ones, so they could learn cross-generationally from each other. Extensive communications and education also took place to help employees understand what the company was doing and *why*.

UPS emphasized the need to maintain and strengthen the elements of its brand (the behaviors and actions) that initially made it successful. Management understood that the way to

do this was to prepare the workforce to live the new brand based on the company's historic values and beliefs. By doing this, UPS has maximized its chance of demonstrating to customers that its new services are a consistent extension of the UPS services they already value, delivered to the same standards to which they've become accustomed.

### **What's in a name?**

All of our learnings about brand don't prevent any number of companies each year from thinking they can instantly rejuvenate themselves by ditching their old moniker for a new one.

Just think of the new brands we have been bombarded with in recent years. Altria, Novartis, ReliaStar. Can you describe what each of these companies does?

In recent years it has become very popular (one might be tempted to say, trendy) to "rebrand" a company by renaming it. Whether it's the pressure to live up to the expectations and excitement of this young millennium, or the desire to be distinctive in an increasingly competitive global economy, the trend toward adoption of new corporate brand names is unmistakable.

Truth be told, many of the most successful names in fact started out under a different names. Do the names Sound of Music or Allegheny Airlines ring a bell? Today, we know them better as Best Buy and US Airways. The latter, especially, is a good example of why renaming, while sometimes necessary, does not ultimately guarantee establishment of a successful "new" brand.

Allegheny Airlines may have been a perfect name for a small, regional airline, but not necessarily for an ocean-spanning global carrier that has long since outgrown its roots of puddle-jumping around upstate New York.

Ultimately, the key message for those who, like Allegheny, determine it makes sense to change their names, is the following: names don't mean anything unless companies make them mean something! At least, not until competitors and the marketplace do the job for them. How do you make your name "mean something?" Through all of the behaviors and actions we've been discussing. Meaning is tied to a sound business strategy.

### Guess who?

In early 2002, people were exposed to an intriguing advertising campaign, What is M-Life? The ads were offbeat and focused on everything from health issues to social topics. They not only caught your attention but also moved you to visit the Web site posted in the ads.

On Super Bowl Sunday that year, the M-Life secret was revealed...it was actually AT&T Wireless. Guess what... game over! AT&T was such a diminished brand that the linkage to M-Life actually worked against consumer buy-in to the service.

**The moral of this story is: be clear about your brand's acceptance before believing it can add value to a new product or service.**

## Everything old is new again

IBM, 3M and RCA have all built leading world-class brands without significantly straying from their roots as International Business Machines, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing and Record Corporation of America, even though their brands stretch back more than 100 years.

Look at GE. The brand name has scarcely changed since Thomas Edison founded it in 1879. GE is the only company listed in the Dow Jones Industrial Index that was also listed in the original index in 1896. But during that remarkable span, both the company and what the brand stands for have evolved exponentially.

The GE brand was for decades a household brand name among consumers. Everything from light bulbs to TVs to dishwashers — nearly every home in the country had electric products with the GE name. Today, Thomas Edison would scarcely recognize the company he created. GE makes most of its profits from financial services and industrial products like locomotives and jet engines.

Despite the diversification and the deemphasizing of consumer products, GE has built one of the world's strongest brands around the strength of a single word: *quality*. When GE said, “We bring good things to life,” it referred to everything from NBC television programs to GE-branded credit cards. GE is known and respected for being a leader in every market it enters, and for applying its famous Six Sigma initiative that provides a roadmap to quality by reducing errors by several orders of magnitude.

It's hard to imagine GE even contemplating changing its brand to “Genelcom” or some other computer-generated

name merely in an attempt to create a modern brand image. GE has built and evolved its brand as the company has evolved, and it recognizes the value of the brand far outweighs any potential benefits of a radical rethinking of the brand.

### The good word

Want an even simpler definition for your brand? Strive to own a word in the minds of the consumer. Can you reduce your mission to one or two words? Think of these examples:

**UPS** = overnight

**Disney** = family entertainment

**Palm** = hand held

**Wal-Mart** = low price

**3M** = innovation

**Volvo** = safety

These brands don't simply claim these qualities — they *own* them in the minds of the consumer. These companies' laser-like focus on living out their mission every day has earned them hard-won places in the hearts and minds of their customers, employees, business partners and investors.

### Branded for life

If you do it right, brand is forever. However, a brand that is poorly managed, tarnished or tied to a negative image can also last forever, casting a long shadow or a bad reputation that can be impossible to shake.

In the Tylenol scare, Johnson & Johnson's McNeil Consumer Healthcare elected to aggressively defend its brand in the face of what could have been a devastating situation. By immediately instituting a complete nationwide recall and implementing stringent (and costly) product safety measures, McNeil restored the integrity of its brand to the point where Tylenol emerged post-scandal with an even greater market share.

Contrast that with the Ford/Firestone tire debacle, where consumers responded poorly to what they perceived as both companies' reluctance to acknowledge problems and undertake steps to remedy the situation. Both Ford and Firestone's brand equity suffered. In the case of Firestone, some openly question its ability to live on as a consumer brand name.

Taco Bell's actions in the wake of a confirmed E. coli outbreak in early December 2006, serves as an example of what not to do in a crisis but also, what not to do to protect your brand.

Instead of dealing with the situation head-on, Taco Bell chose to employ shallow and cheap communications techniques to assure customers that its products were safe. The problem: they didn't know.

To protect its brand and its business, Taco Bell should have followed the Tylenol playbook.

By ignoring the situation and treating people with little or no respect, Taco Bell has hurt itself immeasurably.

For better or worse, brands possess staying power.

**The moral: we must nurture our brands well because they are the company. And they're embodied by employees — not systems, structures and words.**

### **How do you “nurture” your brand?**

So, it's important for you to nurture your brand well. But, how do you do that?

To nurture your brand you must:

- ◆ Emphasize quality relationships and products. This is the very foundation of a successful brand.
- ◆ Understand the nuances of aesthetics, and the important role design plays in how people feel about your products.
- ◆ Work cross-functionally, to shape the diverse perspectives of people across the organization.
- ◆ Regularly educate your people (and yourselves) on what's happening both in the marketplace and in society. This helps everyone put their role and purpose in a larger context.
- ◆ Be sensitive to shifts in customer perceptions, and then as communicators, determine how to best bring those learnings back into the organization.
- ◆ Make sure you help your people bridge your brand with how they live. Let them *discover* your brand and its merits rather than *sell* it to them.

### Is it brand yet?

Brand is not anything you can dictate or impose. Brand simply is. Your company, like any other company, already has a brand identity. The real questions become, is it who you *need* to be? Is it something you can *grow* with? Is it something you are *living* every single day?

Would people know who you are if you took down your signs?

Would people say, “I *know* who they are!”? ◆

**Edelman Change and Employee Engagement** is the global organizational (internal) change communications consulting group of Edelman, the largest independent public relations firm in the world and the third largest overall. The mission of Edelman Change and Employee Engagement is to advise and assist organizations on strengthening the ability to implement corporate strategy and initiatives through management and employee engagement and effective communications in order to build brands and achieve business goals.

The group provides distinctive expertise in organizational effectiveness, culture transformation, strategy implementation and accessibility, CEO transition and positioning, internal branding, post-merger integration, labor-management relations, internal communications programming and research/ measurement.

*Note: “**Taking Down the Sign**” is one of four Business Commentaries in Edelman’s series. The others are: “**What Does it Mean to be A Manager Today?**” detailing the new skills needed for being an effective manager in a global business environment; “**CEO Transition: First Impressions,**” describing the importance of a new CEO’s actions, communications and behaviors in gaining trust and setting an actionable agenda and “**Why Corporate Initiatives Fail,**” a discussion of the underlying reasons why corporate initiatives fail more than they succeed and lessons for reversing this trend.*

All four commentaries are also available in booklet form. Copies can be obtained by e-mailing [inboxedelmanchange@edelman.com](mailto:inboxedelmanchange@edelman.com).

