

Four Cornerstones for Building Your Brand

by Tom Finan

On Feb. 26, 2008, all Starbucks® coffee shops across the United States shut their doors at 5:30 p.m. for a special training session on techniques and standards. “It’s really about ensuring that the customer experience that we provide is the best that it can be,” a Starbucks spokesperson said at the time. The program was conducted in an effort to reconnect Starbucks associates with the reasons patrons first visited the company’s stores — and were now going elsewhere.

Starbucks’ story very closely parallels that of the construction industry over the last decade. In an age of easy credit, the never-ending emergence of strip malls and office buildings paralleled the spread of the green Starbucks logo from Fargo to Beijing. But breakneck expansion comes with a price; in Starbucks’ case, the price was core values.

In 2007, Josh Foster, president of J.E. Foster Building Company, said his company built entire stores and/or did tenant finishes for 30 Starbucks locations. In 2008, J.E. Foster, which has been the ASA-Midwest Council’s “Small GC of the Year” for six of the last seven years, helped to dismantle eight of the 600 stores that Starbucks shut down last year. “There was a guy with a clipboard there, making sure that everything went on the truck,” Foster said. Somewhere, there’s a “Raiders of the Lost Ark”-style warehouse piled full of espresso machines.

Meanwhile, the same well-communicated reputation for strong relationships and performance that landed Foster so many coffee shops during good times is allowing him to win work away from competitors now.



Branding is NOT about the coffee you put into the cup, as Starbucks learned (and McDonald’s is now learning with its effort to offer a cut rate “remium cup”). It’s about the “promise” of the customer experience that you will consistently deliver.

What Is Your Promise?

Foster has driven the performance/relationships message of his brand throughout his company’s culture. Thirty years ago, subcontractors asked marketing/communications firms to develop brochures and logos to meet the expectations of GCs and owners. Today the firms get calls for branding strategies and for Web sites. But, now as then, tactics that have no connection to your core values are doomed to be ineffective.

Companies lose sight of their brands at a significant cost to their bottom lines. Three years ago, Wal-Mart® announced a more “upscale” approach. It was a fiasco. Now, Wal-Mart is advertising “Save Money. Live Better,” and the tough economic times have actually worked in its favor. To understand the importance of branding and to appreciate its significance to your company, it’s helpful to

understand what a brand is ... and what it isn’t.

The first brands were used to mark game or cattle. Then, artisans and craftsmen began putting their “brand” on objects they made. Today, a brand is a promise to consistently meet expectations. Those expectations are not about attributes (four-wheel drive, robust coffee flavor); instead, those expectations are about benefits (the level of service at an Acura® dealership, the personalized experience at Starbucks). In the book *Married to the Brand*, William J. McEwen makes the case that strong brand loyalties

are both quantifiable and explainable. Loyalty is not the result of marketing hype: You buy coffee at Starbucks because the staff remembers your name and the way you like your coffee, not because of advertising or because its coffee is “better” than McDonald’s® coffee.

The Rewards of Strong Branding

Brand strategy and development firm Chadwick Communications, New York, N.Y., reports that strong brands command a 7 percent premium on price and make sales 40 percent more effective. Chadwick says that building a brand has more to do with what is communicated than with the product or service itself.

Brand alignment must permeate every aspect of your company and extend through the way you communicate and market that identity. *There are four “cornerstones” for every brand, and understanding them is crucial to success:*

1. *Exemplify your brand in everything you do.* It’s not enough to have a great logo or tagline or an outstanding Web site. Whether you are known for high-touch service, or for “green” building knowledge, everything communicated inside and outside of your company should resonate with that message.



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2. *Establish and strengthen your brand through associations.* These “associations” can be either internal or external. Are you involved in community groups? Do you give thoughtful consideration to the charity events that you sponsor and leverage what you donate to attain maximum visibility? Do you create a sense of “belonging to the club” by sharing your expertise in certain construction disciplines, techniques or knowledge through presentations, opt-in newsletters, e-news, or participation in Web 2.0 blogs?
3. *Let the converted preach.* This metaphor is borrowed from Sunday morning: You as “pastor” can “preach” to someone all day long, but the way to make a “convert” is through the daily practice of a true believer. Better than a great Web site or brochure is the GC or customer who tells a friend or colleague about your company in glowing terms. By focusing on communicating your values — maximizing “touches” in the industry and with customers — you increase the likelihood they will do just that.
4. *Back the team in the field.* Empowerment, enthusiasm and education are the three “E’s” that form this cornerstone. Turn your company team into ambassadors and salespeople who will speak enthusiastically to their friends and associates. Are your employees empowered to make decisions or spend money when they need to “find a way to say yes” and “make it right” for a customer? Do you create employee-specific communications, such as a newsletter or Web site? Do you plan special events that make your

field managers and core craftspeople feel part of a team and understand customers’ experience?

Making Branding a Personal Agenda

Great brands are built from the inside out. Your company’s brand should be written in your customers’ minds and engraved on your employees’ hearts. Your brand is that One True Thing about your company that’s blazing in your gut.

You can’t market your way to a great brand: Your “walk” must match your “talk.” A brand isn’t a Web site or a logo embroidered on a shirt: Your company’s culture brings its brand to life. ■

Tom Finan has been the publisher of St. Louis Construction News & Real Estate since 1976. He is the director of business development for Paradowski Creative, a strategic and creative services firm located in St. Louis. He can be contacted at tom@paradowski.com.

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