

How To Keep Your Corporate Branding Strategy On The Cutting-Edge

JAN. 5, 2015

By Rachel Weingarten

Some brands stay fresh and relevant generation after generation. What makes certain corporate branding strategies timeless while others come and go?

Take Brooks Brothers. No less a person than Abraham Lincoln was one of the brand's most loyal customers. So how does a nearly 200-year-old company not only stick around, but remain relevant and even cutting-edge?

Make Well-Trained Staff a Priority

One of the biggest secrets to Brooks Brothers' ongoing success is something that has become a hallmark of the brand: a well-trained sales staff evolved for the modern consumer. For example, the company recently implemented quizscore by Multimedia Plus to create a highly customized iPad app for in-store use. The app allows Brooks Brothers staff to focus on everything from product knowledge to what to say to a customer in the first 30 seconds he or she is in the store. At this point, more than 3,660 employees have access to the technology.

Keep Evolving

Sometimes you don't have to be in business for a century to know it's time to change. The decades-old I Can't Believe It's Not Butter product was recently updated to reflect modern consumers' preferences for healthier, non-GMO ingredients.

The name of the product remains, but the ingredients and production process have changed drastically—even the taglines seem lighter and healthier. And, during the last decade and a half, the brand's famous tongue-in-cheek advertisements with romance novel heartthrob Fabio have been replaced with ads that tout the product's new commitment to no artificial colors, flavors or trans-fats.

corporate branding

Successful corporate branding strategies take into account everything from consumer evolution to company traditions.

Create Interesting Offshoots Faithful to the Brand

While motorcycles are incredibly trendy today due to the popularity of shows like Sons of Anarchy, Harley-Davidson HOG -0.32% (H-D) was founded more than 100 years ago by childhood friends William S. Harley and Arthur Davidson. H-D was only one of two American motorcycle companies to survive the Great Depression, but it fell out of favor in the 1970s due to the rise of lightweight motorized bikes.

So what's a smart company to do? In the case of H-D, it created lifestyle products including footwear for men and women that can be used on or off the road. Amy Lovall, product manager, Harley-Davidson Footwear, says the company's line of shoes and boots "captures the spirit of such an iconic brand and feels authentic, with heritage-inspired styles."

Keep Close to the Cutting Edge

Lutron Electronics Company, which was founded in Pennsylvania in 1961 by Joel and Ruth Spira, has grown from a mom-and-pop organization to an international brand with more than 20,000 products and 2,000 patents.

Michael Pessina, Lutron president, and Susan Hakkarainen, chief marketing officer (and daughter of Joel Spira), shared some brand history.

In 1959, Joel Spira invented the solid-state dimmer in his New York City apartment. Spira's personal invention changed the face of residential lighting control, and also fueled the innovation and development of products and solutions that control some of the world's most iconic landmarks and buildings, including the Empire State Building, said Pessina and Hakkarainen.

And Lutron's products continue to evolve.

In 2003, the brand launched electric light control and interactive control of daylight with ultra-quiet, motorized shades. And, in 2008, Lutron focused on solutions for the renovation market, including wireless products that are simple to install in existing buildings to save energy with no sacrifice to the people in the space, noted Pessina and Hakkarainen. Energy efficiency is another ongoing push.

All of this points to the need to keep doing what you do well, but to also look for cues in the economy and consumer preferences to keep updating your brand's offerings.

Maintain 100% Focus

Brooks Running Company was founded in 1914 when John Brooks Goldenberg bought Quaker Shoe Company, a small manufacturer of bathing shoes and ballet slippers.

For nearly eight decades, Brooks made a variety of footwear, including baseball shoes, bowling shoes, football shoes, running shoes, all-purpose gym shoes and ice skates.

About 13 years ago, the entire brand shifted and, according to Jim Weber, CEO of Brooks, "We began to focus singularly on the run, rallying our entire team around the purpose of inspiring everyone to run and be active."

In a market crowded with running shoes and products, this could have been a risky venture, but Weber didn't—and doesn't—see it that way.

The company employs more than 600 team members in more than 60 countries, and "the most iconic and defining element of our brand is our 100% focus on the run," he said. "It means we are more likely to ask runners the right questions when creating gear so that we nail the details they value."

In 2014, the brand celebrated a 100-year anniversary and reached a milestone of half a billion dollars in annual sales. The company also moved into a new, innovative, "deep-green" global headquarters in Seattle.

The Brooks brand defines itself as a runners' lifestyle brand. So there's both history and a shared commitment to a single sport that, for a majority of their customers, is a lifestyle.

Respect Your Roots

Denis Daly Wood managed to take a family business formed by his great grandfather in 1895 and transform the business model but stay true to the quality. What was once Daly Brothers Department Store in California is now dalys1895.com, an online purveyor of men's fashion for men who take their fashion very seriously.

Since the family name is on every product, Wood takes special pride in the details, from the numbered pocket squares sourced in Italy to the hand-tooled alligator belts. "Feel closely enough and you can find tiny bumps from the cobbler's hammers," said Wood, as he explained the incredibly intricate method of making each belt.

But evolving to a specialty site means keeping some of the original details intact. Even the packaging is developed through a rigorous process that, according to Wood, took about a year to develop: "I went to the absolute finest stores in London and New York and looked at their packaging, and I wanted to make something better."

Part of the reasoning was to create not just a keepsake, but also a presentation, he said. "When somebody receives this in the mail, I want them to actually keep the package if I can make it good enough—I think half the people might save the box."

As to the products' unique yellow and brown colors, Wood explained that, back in 1895, the packaging included brown lettering and a yellow bag.

"I got some of the original bags and and tried to match it and color-coordinate it as best as I could," he said. "I took what we had used for 100 years and made it better. I just wanted to move that heritage forward."

Just as Tiffany's iconic robin's-egg-blue boxes evoke a certain expectation of what's inside, Wood respects the heritage of the brand while working to promote an expectation among clients that they will be getting something better and unique—from the box to the finished product.

Getting There Is Only Half the Battle

While it can be tempting to focus on companies that are enjoying their 15 minutes of success, it's better in the long run to pay attention to companies that have been successful over the long haul.

A common thread among successful heritage brands is that they evolve some of their methods—sometimes to the cutting edge—often it's the old-fashioned approach to service that keeps their customers coming back.

In the case of Lutron, for example, calls to the company are still—53 years later—answered by a switchboard operator, not an automated recording. This commitment to service means that customers can access 24/7 live support by trained Lutron-employed technical professionals, noted the company's Pessina and Hakkarainen.

And, in the end, isn't that a large part of why a brand retains loyalty for decades, if not centuries? Long-term success hinges on constantly providing customers with modern innovations while providing the best possible product and customer experience.

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Originally Posted On:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/sungardas/2015/01/05/how-to-keep-your-corporate-branding-strategy-on-the-cutting-edge/>