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**TACTICAL
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**YOUR BRAND IS YOUR
LIFE JACKET
WEAR IT LOUD & PROUD**

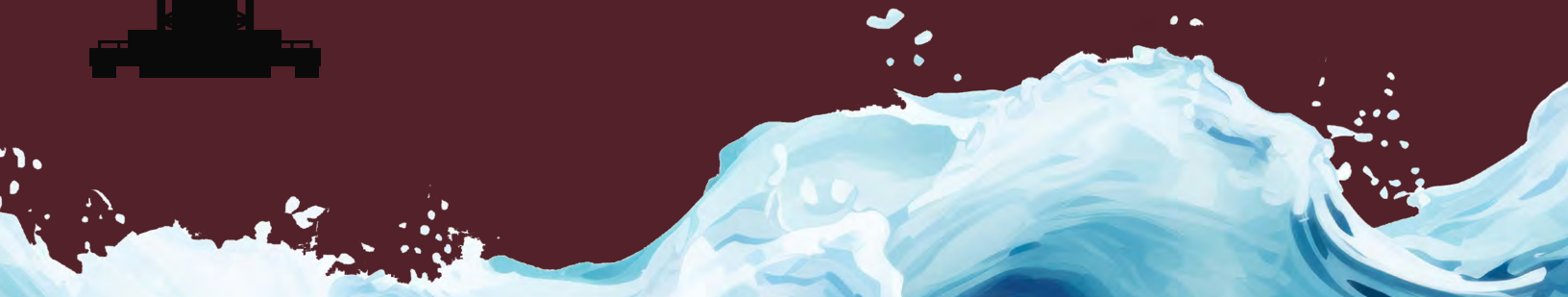
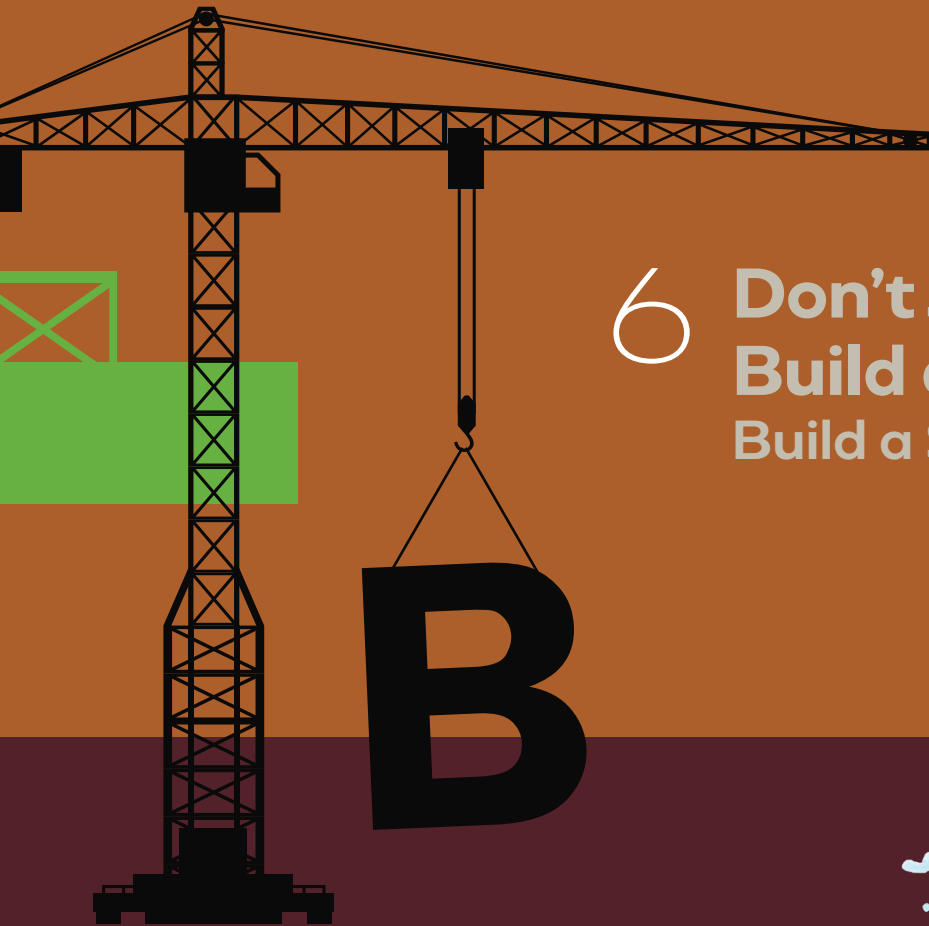
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YOUR BRAND IS YOUR LIFE JACKET

by David
Cooper

**WEAR IT
LOUD
AND PROUD**

Lately, I'm not hearing a lot of conversation from business leaders about brand strategy. More often, I get urgent calls like this: "My sales are below expectations. What can I do right now to turn it around?" My response is, "You're looking for a miracle worker. I'm not that guy."

Sometimes, the conversation ends there. Other times, executives accept that there are no quick fixes and choose to course correct with the preparedness that only brand strategy can provide. A strong brand strategy is essential to owning a positive and lasting presence in the market. It creates and sustains brand equity, builds sales and customer loyalty, and leads to overall success.

Perceptive leaders know that the job of a consultant like me is to help companies make changes in their businesses before they have to. Before sales take a dive. Before customers defect to the competition. Before markets shift without warning. And long before revenue projections are made based on what CEOs and sales executives want, rather than with a realistic perspective.

My firm has stayed deeply rooted in brand strategy since 1998. It is fail-safe during market twists and

survival are dire without the ability to stay afloat. If you don't want to be in this boat, make your life jacket part of your brand strategy from the get-go. More clearly, your brand is your life jacket. Wear it always, no matter the climate or your current level of success. You never know when you'll need it, even if you're an accomplished and tenured professional.

adjustments to their businesses, but not permanent ones – and this would become their undoing.

A lot of companies found themselves behind the eight ball when the astronomical e-commerce levels brought on by COVID-19 not only sustained but grew post-pandemic. Firms thought pre-pandemic levels would



It's surprising how so many businesses remain connected to the way things were in 2019, before the pandemic, as if there's a rewind button. But 2019 is never coming back. To me, that's a good thing.

turns and economic upheavals. Popular or not, the purpose of building brand strategy is to help companies anticipate and stay in front of risks, resolve challenges, and leverage opportunities.

Life jackets are a PFD! That is, a personal floatation device. If the vessel is capsizing, chances of

Cases in point

Four former CEOs shared with me that they had recently shut down their businesses, no longer equipped to compete and win. All started their companies after the 2008 recession and they were successful. Then the pandemic hit and everything changed. These and many other firms made temporary

return. Having made minimal changes instead of strategic commitments to e-commerce, they had no idea how to do it as good or better than the market demanded.

Failure to plan and evolve is why those four companies closed their doors. They were happy to talk about what the pandemic did to their businesses, which I found shortsighted. It wasn't the crisis environment that did it. The pandemic merely accelerated the global e-commerce shift and numerous other changes that were already emerging, such as consumer demand for better experiences, as well as consumers' desire to buy from companies that

share their values. The fallout of the pandemic simply caught companies by surprise – without a life jacket.

Things have changed forever. It's surprising how so many businesses remain connected to the way things were in 2019, before the pandemic, as if there's a rewind button. But 2019 is never coming back. To me, that's a good thing. I find myself asking some business owners, "Was business great in 2018 and 2019? No? And that's the 'great' you want to go back to?"

These are the dynamics I'm seeing right now. Fortunately, for most organizations, it's never too late to course correct. Looking forward calls for a renewed focus on brand strategy.

Companies everywhere share your challenges

In recent months, I have given multiple presentations to hundreds of business owners on the importance of brand and branding. One presentation for the Small Business Administration (SBA) was for established companies in business for seven to 20 years. Another was for young start-ups up to three years old and some that are preparing to open their doors.

Let me backtrack here to say that I don't give presentations. I have conversations. And what I find through audience interaction is that no matter how big or small an organization, their issues are all the same. Everyone is desperately trying to make effective decisions and investments to confidently move forward in today's volatile, ever-changing environment.

They're trying to protect or save their cultures while laying people

off. Layoffs are happening across industries, and leaders lack focus on how to keep remaining employees happy. Retention rates are horrible. Then there is staggering growth in competition and leaders are desperately trying to find the right messages, tone and tactics to keep customer relationships strong. Other common issues surround talent acquisition, economic uncertainty, rising customer expectations, digital transformation, market disruption, innovation and...the list goes on.

Fortunately, for most organizations, it's never too late to course correct.

Brand strategy to the rescue!

When I pull up to a location to give an interactive presentation, I grab my briefcase – and lifejacket. I literally hit the podium wearing the life jacket over my blazer. I ask attendees if they know how important this attire is, whether they wear one and when they put it on. My purpose is to visually illustrate the importance of going to market protected by a well-managed brand, equipped to stay afloat during known and unforeseen challenges.

A solid brand can mean two things: knowing you don't need to be saved or that you can be saved if certain factors turn things upside down. That's why it should be in place before you need it. There are going to be times that are extra tough and times when you're going to mess up. Do your employees and customers like you enough to forgive you if you falter? I know from decades of experience that your brand will afford you grace with your constituents.

Your brand + branding = brand strategy

Your 'brand' is how your company and offerings are perceived by people who interact with you. In essence, brand is who you are in the market. It is all-inclusive of your operations, products, services, culture, company values and goals, and overall personality as a provider. The totality of all these parts impacts everyone in your universe, from your employees to customers, partners and society. 'Branding' is different. It involves

the methods you use to deliver the value and promise of your brand through various processes and programs. Branding is the process that shapes your relationships with all stakeholders, inside and outside of your company.

When you continually refine your complete brand strategy, you can rely on it to help you stay your course, find clarity and buoyancy in chaos, and seize opportunities that align with your brand values and goals.

In today's competitive business world, it is increasingly important to wear your brand out loud and proud, to project it in everything you do. Your constituents need to know and see first-hand that you have a clear purpose and commitment to your future and theirs.

by David Cooper



**DON'T JUST
BUILD A**

BRAND

Build a Success Story!

Executives consult with me for a multitude of reasons. I enter every client relationship at ground zero, meaning I know nothing about their challenge or opportunity, their operations or even their level of acumen in running a business. However, after decades in the consultancy business, there are three things I know with certainty:

1. Every good business outcome, no matter the need or goal, starts with a solid brand.
2. Most executives don't know how to build a brand, much less a successful one.
3. Building a successful brand is just one part of a much bigger success story.

The truth is, I empathize. There are many parts to this equation and rare is the business owner or executive with the expertise to know what all those parts are, their functions, how they differ, and how they work together. It's almost always the case that while a client's initial

outreach to me may have nothing to do with the brand, this is where we start. There's such a need for this positive and educational message that I've built presentations around it, so that more people can understand how to build a successful brand.

Know the building blocks

We've all heard the phrase, "form follows function," which was coined by architect Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) and became the benchmark for early architects. It meant that a building's purpose should be the starting point for its design. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who worked for Sullivan, extended his mentor's teaching by changing the phrase to "form and function are one."

As you'll see below, there is a solid parallel for building a brand – and compelling reasons for getting it right to become a strong and successful one.

First and foremost is a company's ability to answer this question: "Who are you and what is your purpose?"

With these answers, form and function truly do become one.

So, let's start here...

1. What is a brand?

It's interesting the responses you can get when you ask this question. What immediately comes to mind for a lot of people (business owners included) is a company's name and logo. But a brand is infinitely more than that! Brand embodies a company's entire identity and how that identity is perceived in the marketplace.

A brand is a combination of tangible elements (people, products, services) and intangible elements (experiences, impressions, reputation, loyalty) that work together to create a full and unique image. All elements work in tandem to carve out a unique presence and perception in the marketplace, which is essential for long-term success and customer loyalty.

Here are the building blocks of a successful brand:

- 1. BRAND IDENTITY** (company or brand logo): The name, visual design elements, colors, typography, and messaging that distinguish the brand in the marketplace
- 2. BRAND CULTURE:** The system of beliefs and values that a brand fosters internally and shares with the outside world
- 3. BRAND PROMISE:** The value or experience that consumers can expect to receive through every interaction with the brand
- 4. BRAND IMAGE:** Perceptions and impressions of the brand that are held by employees, customers and society

5. BRAND POSITIONING:

The space a brand owns in the minds of consumers and how this differentiates the brand from its competitors

6. BRAND VOICE AND PERSONALITY:

The uniquely recognizable human characteristics personified by a brand to create distinct emotional connections with employees, consumers and society

7. BRAND EQUITY:

Measurable value and strength that a brand owns in the marketplace

8. BRAND EXPERIENCE:

The many ways a brand and its customers interact with each other and the quality of those interactions

9. BRAND LOYALTY:

The advocacy that is built through positive experiences and emotional connections with consumers

10. BRAND EXTENSION:

The halo effect of a strong brand on its new products or services or its entry into new markets

2. What is a branding vs. marketing?

Branding and marketing are often confused because they are intricately related – yet they are totally separate disciplines. Branding is about shaping perceptions and the methods used to do it. Marketing is about



delivering and selling products and attracting and retaining customers.

It's important to recognize and pay due homage to both disciplines.

- Branding is the process used to deliver brand value and shape relationships with stakeholders. It involves systems, programs, brand management and customer targeting. Since its primary goal is to build trust, loyalty and equity in the market, it must go beyond creating a unique and identifiable name and look of a brand, product or service. The much larger focus is to build a strong, positive identity based on brand values, personality and market differentiators – and create impressions that resonate with target audiences.

- Marketing is the act of presenting and creating interest in a brand and influencing stakeholders to engage it, buy it, use it, and come back for more – all based on targeted messaging and market positioning. Its top goal is to generate awareness, interest, demand, sales and revenue.



Marketing really encompasses a full business process, everything from research to product development, bringing a product to market, pricing, advertising, promotion, sales, distribution, customer service, and the all-important customer experience.

There's no success story without these ingredients

MISSION CONSENSUS: Earlier, I stressed the first thing a company must do to build a successful brand, and that is to answer this question: "Who are you and what is your purpose?" After 26 years in asking executives that question, you'd be surprised how many could not tell me, or executives at the same firm had different answers, including within the C-suite! If the CEO says you're a pacesetter, the president says you're a pioneer and the COO says you're a titan, form and function will lack harmony. What I continually find is that

you reach consensus, instill it across the organization!

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: The perceptions that customers have after interacting with your business are crucial. Today's companies are challenged to continually improve customer experience across all touchpoints in the customer journey, from digital marketing and customer service to the importance of gaining customer feedback after

customer sentiments and insights, analyzing feedback, and making data-driven decisions to improve customer experience. It's about time!

A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC

CULTURE: When you elevate customers to the pinnacle of your organization's success, you will automatically pay more attention to their needs and preferences, increase their satisfaction and loyalty, improve your customer retention rates, and become more in tune with market trends. You will also gain competitive advantages, a stronger brand reputation, and greater engagement among your employees, who will become motivated by seeing their direct impact on customer satisfaction and company success.

When you elevate customers to the pinnacle of your organization's success, you will automatically ... improve your customer retention rates, and become more in tune with market trends.

Set yourself up for success

Building a brand is an ongoing process. Given the effort and resources it takes to do it right and maintain it, why settle for just a brand when you can build a success story? Spirited companies constantly up their games



each transaction – and acting on it. Granted, most of us don't want to hear what customers

don't like about us, but I'm here to tell you, that's the only thing that matters! When a project is finished or a product is sold, it triggers an invoice – and it should also trigger a survey. I'm encouraged by the number of companies that are finally reaching for the gold in

to improve employee relations and protect market share with innovative strategies, new offerings, customer-centric business and distribution models, and agility in offering competitive pricing and other strategic aims. Be a spirited company!



companies haven't had to define this. So, the fundamental task is to reach a consensus. Here's a helpful hint. A good answer to that question isn't what you offer, but what you believe. It's the core of what you do and why you do it better than anybody else. Once

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