The delicate art of rebranding: Retaining equity while creating a fresh face

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Abstract

What can a company do when its brand is recognisable within target publics, but it doesn’t really represent the company anymore? Rebranding is a delicate balance of retaining valuable brand equity and awareness, while also grasping on any aspects of the business that are missed with a current brand. By conducting a skilful rebrand, companies can avoid becoming stale and stagnant and let the true values and aspirations shine through. This article examines an in-depth case study of the author’s company rebrand, weighing in on research, branding, web development and public relations’ roles in the process. The author shares on-the-ground experiences to help deconstruct and analyse how companies can hit, or miss, that re-brand balance. This pragmatic and informative article will help any company, in any industry, find a starting point for any type of rebranding process. The author provides practical tools for readers to take back to the workplace as they think about what their brand is truly representing to their audiences, and exactly how to hit the middle of the target with their own rebrand.

Keywords
corporate rebranding, company branding, brand development, brand equity, rebranding case study, branding research, branding and public relations

INTRODUCTION

‘Always design a thing by considering it in its next largest context — a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan.’

Frank Lloyd Wright

Anyone who is a consumer understands the vitality of brands — sometimes without even realising it. Daily, people blow their noses on Kleenex, cover wounds with BandAids and ‘are lovin’ it’ at the golden arches of McDonalds. While it may sometimes be difficult to measure as a tangible asset with an assigned value, it is typically easy intuitively to assess a brand as strong or weak, relevant or lost, authentic or contrived. Figuratively, the brand marks the marriage between the company and the customer. It is the holding place for trust and expectation built over many touch points, interactions and transactions.

Within a brand are equities, sometimes a few, sometimes dozens, that the brand has built over time. Taglines, colours,
implied messages, are all within this equity set. These components of a brand are repeated, owned in communications, and represent the distillation of, focus of and choice from perhaps hundreds of options for communicating value. Imagine that the brand and all of these equities are on a vector with a trajectory, for better or worse. The brand is not a singular or isolated effort in one dimension. Everything a company, person or organisation does must work together to tell the story of the brand. Deciding when to affect that vector with a rebranding investment carries risk with both upside and downside possibilities. By examining these risks briefly, and outlining steps for establishing goals of the rebranding, this paper will illustrate how to pursue a rebranding initiative.

The reasons for rebranding are often the following:

- competitive landscape dictating further differentiation;
- strategic shift in value proposition (new offering);
- relevance waning or becoming outdated.

The first two points capture an upside opportunity and the last mitigates declining sales, or the risk thereof, without action. In either event, the company will be investing money to maximise an opportunity that promises a return. Outlining objectives for a successful rebranding prior to the investment will help to focus and minimise tangential explorations. While a company might identify specific brand assets to modify, without exception, the rebranding effort should be:

- strategic;
- authentic to the company’s culture and values;
- resonant with the target’s values and needs;
- pointed/clear;
- focused on providing meaningful differentiation;
- flexible to retain existing brand equity.

REBRANDING FOR RELEVANCE: A CASE STUDY

The author’s company, a market research services firm, recently went through a rebranding exercise that provides an interesting case study for examination. Despite their experience working on messaging and rebranding initiatives for hundreds of firms, the company’s most challenging rebranding project turned out to be its own. The situation involved a growing market research firm with a young, smart and innovative spirit. The name and look of the existing brand was recognisable within target markets and the team did not want to affect the level of awareness negatively. However, the brand tended to position the firm as a commodity offering. This positioning was made obvious by the company’s tagline (or lack thereof) ‘[The author's company] Online Survey Programming and Reporting’. It quite simply answered the question, ‘What does the company do?’ Like other market research services firms, the author’s company offers online market research survey programming and reporting. When examining the brand, the team knew there was more to communicate about the company’s services, but no one had yet discovered how to say it.

The company was interested in retaining some of its established equities as mentioned above. The team working on the brand liked being perceived as creative and innovative, as pioneers in a quantitative-data-driven industry that otherwise appears a
little stale and predictable. Beyond that, there were few liabilities, if any, to address. The objective for the rebrand was more about capturing an offering that more precisely carves-out, as the company’s own, a unique place in the competitive landscape.

Starting at the beginning: Brand research

Being researchers, the author’s company understood the value of customer research for uncovering an insight. The process began by contracting and working with an outside advertising agency, called TBD, to conduct qualitative research with a sample of the customer base to capture authentic experiences, perceptions and opportunity. Research goals centred on developing a strategy that would drive brand behaviour by creating clarity, establish emotional resonance, unleash the potential of the brand and ensure the future vitality of the company. The team realised upfront that clients (and prospective clients) have a greater voice in defining the values of the brand. The company also acknowledged that industry mindsets had evolved and that its clients were no longer looking for vendors to solve their problems, but rather partners who could help them think differently.

The research plan centred on in-depth telephone interviews with research decision makers at advertising agencies, research firms and brands, and included a mix of experiences. Both existing and prospective clients proved to be respondents with both positive and negative perceptions of the company and also those with a mix of familiarity and experience with it.

Through this process, the company discovered that there is great danger in being perceived as a ‘tools’ or technology company. There is an underlying belief that a company cannot rely only on innovation in tools or technology. It is unownable territory. The innovation opportunity for the author’s company involved pushing beyond the technology and providing innovation in thinking — not only by creating new ways to conduct research but also by providing clients with different ways to approach problems, different ways to ask questions and new ideas that generate new solutions, as well as generating unexpected solutions or opportunities and best practices.

The research uncovered positive feelings about the author’s company, along with several red flags. As a result of the research, the team realised that just raising brand awareness wasn’t enough — they had to change how people think about the company. The view needed to move from current perceptions about the company being ‘trusted’, ‘easy’ and ‘dependable’ to future thinking that would make it a crucial partner because of its insight, innovation and inspiration. The emotional focus of the brand had to change. This new thinking opens the door for what the brand can do and represent. Namely, the company champions insight, facilitates innovation and inspires. Ideally, the company will take on a very different role in relation to clients than it has previously and an opportunity will be created to own a bigger territory. The outcome of the research pointed to specific opportunities for the author’s company to capture by creating a product portfolio that spans multiple needs. However, these opportunities were not yet creatively articulated in a way that would be interesting and meaningful to the customer.

The next step: The briefing phase

In addition to refocusing their brand positioning, the author’s company worked
with its advertising agency to revisit brand values and messaging to ensure that the company was holistically communicating the brand promise both internally and externally.

While the scope of this paper does not cover managing a creative firm, it is important to consider the briefing phase. The creative brief should be shared between the agency and the company’s marketing team. The purpose of the brief is to guide and inspire the creative team to deliver strategic work. Without agreement prior to the creative exercise, too much subjectivity can enter the review process. It is vital to work closely with outside agencies at the very beginning of the branding process in order to arrive at a brief that is mutually exclusive, but collectively exhaustive in scope, for the rebranding project. The brief gives insight into obtaining a precise, single idea that marks the essence or ethos of the brand. It does not have to be a tagline, or a creative expression, but it must be memorable and actionable.

In this case study, the brief included core architecture for the brand, such as an analysis of the target audience, which appeared as follows:

- **psychographics of the target**: Explorers;
- **focus**: Authentic experience in the research;
- **mindset**: Research uncovers new ideas;
- **need**: New methodologies;
- **Research is an opportunity to think differently.**

Shifting perceptions of the brand, as indicated above, were clearly illustrated in the document shown in Table 1.

The creative brief can provide a solid basis and set of guidelines, which can be referenced throughout the branding process. It can also be shared as a starting point for other team members working on the rebrand, such as public relations.

**Don't forget: Public relations pushes the message**

Integrating an effective public relations and social media strategy are important ways to bolster the brand presence to a large audience, including media, industry influencers and the general public. In the public relations arena, as in the creative branding process as a whole, it is important to remember these wise words, often attributed to Wordsworth:

‘life is divided into three terms — that which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present, and from the present to live better in the future.’

While the author of these timeless words was probably aiming his thoughts toward

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<th>Role</th>
<th>Brand Today</th>
<th>Brand Evolution</th>
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<td>Position</td>
<td>Vendor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Survey programming + reporting</td>
<td>Illuminating opportunity for the researcher</td>
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<td>Take-away</td>
<td>Reliable research tools and programming provider</td>
<td>IMPACT through insight, innovation, inspiration</td>
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<td>Values</td>
<td>Trusted, easy, dependable</td>
<td>Passion, agility, intelligence, integrity</td>
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<td>Personality and traits</td>
<td>Loyal, emerging, supportive, small, similar, easy to use</td>
<td>Respected, nimble, vivid, smart, powerful, champion, campaign</td>
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pure romanticism, they also ring true for the modern art of rebranding.

When conducting an outreach program around a repurposed brand, public relations professionals should:

- remember the messages of the past;
- reshape messages to fit the goals of today;
- ensure that all messages set the stage for the future direction of the company.

In today’s public relations world, communicators are not trying to accomplish that which has not been attempted many times before — both in art and industry — they are just using different tools.

And at no time in history has this been more true than today. Many who started out in public relations decades ago had very few avenues of communication available. A written press release, mailed or faxed to a list of influential journalists, coupled with a few strategic follow-up calls — and then crossed fingers and a fervent prayer that a story would run. Now, they are juggling social media, online wire services, e-mails, blogs and more — using multiple ‘languages’ and formats to get the word out not only to the media, but to the general public.

Using all these communications channels was important for bolstering the rebranding process for the author’s company. Public relations provided exposure to key audiences using topics of interest and news items to reinforce the overarching revised brand strategy. Social media efforts integrated language and tone that aligned with the authenticity that the rebrand sought to create. Objectives for social media efforts, beginning with giants Facebook and Twitter, included:

- improving brand presence across social media channels;
- increasing positive sentiment about the author’s company brand;
- building meaningful relationships that could lead to future partnerships;
- increasing traffic to [the author’s company] Inc.com (where many of the rebranding elements were prominently and artfully displayed).

In order to ensure that a unified front was being presented to target audiences, the public relations team involved in the rebranding process worked closely with the creative agency. Social media were able to reinforce the company’s desire to be perceived as contemporary, young and edgy, while also building on the brand equity statements of partnership and curiosity. Results since the rebrand have seen a ten-fold increase in social media fans and followers, plus a firm recognition by peers as an active voice in the online world of the market research industry. Being involved daily in the social media conversation brings the company and its newly defined brand a heightened level of awareness among targets.

Beyond social media, public relations efforts also centred around presenting the company’s innovations within the market research industry through securing speaking engagements at top industry conferences and editorial placements in respected industry journals. Securing awards for both the company and its leaders also assisted in drawing attention to positive aspects of the company. These more traditional strategies reinforced the company’s image as a respected partner, and provided the venue in which to answer truly those questions ‘What does the company do?’ and ‘Why do they do it’ — core parts of the original brand and the rebranding strategy. As an added value, these opportunities were promoted through new media channels, exposing the company to a larger audience.
Using traditional and new public relations strategies to support the rebranding process is vital. In this field, there is now an opportunity and an ability to truly shape the messages that are pushed out to the media, target audiences and even the general public. Combining third-party messages, such as those found in editorial coverage, with paid marketing assists in shifting perceptions of the brand. Establishing and maintaining lines of communication, understanding and acceptance can be accomplished through effective public relations strategies.

For the author's company rebrand, public relations was able to tell the pieces of the story that reinforce the branding message, while downplaying those pieces that do not. During outreach efforts, the branding strategy was reviewed and supported with today's tools of communication.

When looking to integrate public relations into a rebranding strategy, it is important to ask the following questions and proceed appropriately:

- **Who is the target audience and what are the best ways to reach them?** Build the relationships that are needed to communicate via the most pertinent vehicles related to the target audiences.
- **What communications tools are currently available?** Simply press releases, or will the outreach also integrate a new media/social media electronic strategy? Does the company have the resources to execute fully a social media strategy?
- **What is the paid marketing side of the business doing?** How can the message complement and reinforce the strategy?

**CONCLUSIONS**

Working with its creative firm, the author's company uncovered an opportunity to capture fully the value of its services and unique proprietary software. The new brand strategy pulled the company out of the commodity offering of 'What they do' into a more ownable space of 'Why they do it'. This led to new brand equities to build, which included the core concepts of partnership and curiosity. Partnership links to an unstated customer need for proactive expertise on research projects. Curiosity is a shared value that was latent in the company's prior brand efforts, but already authentic to the company. By directly addressing these brand values, the company crafted an offering that is not focused on the deliverable, but a higher order outcome that its customers benefit from — illuminating opportunity.

It is important to note, that a brand strategy should transcend marketing — it should be authentic to the company. And, if the brand strategy stretches the company or organisation's existing culture, real action must be made to reach for the new articulation of the brand promise. While not a cultural overhaul, the new brand strategy required a specific service orientation within the staff — especially those with customer touch. This was recognised this and an internal marketing piece was created to help communicate the shift to employees.

Since the rebranding effort, the company has grown by 46 per cent and successfully launched a professional research software suite called Beacon that allows users to create and manage their own research projects. The company's recent digital campaign doubled traffic to its website. New business results from this recent campaign are still being measured, but one result is already clear: rebranding is worth the effort when it is done strategically, thoughtfully and with the right outreach plan in place.

In conclusion, a rebrand may not launch a company immediately into legendary
brand space, rubbing shoulders with highly recognisable consumer giants such as Coca-Cola or Microsoft. However, conducting a well-researched, well-organised rebrand can gain traction with target audiences by providing an authentic, vibrant look into a company’s core values. Coupling the creative side of the rebrand with traditional outreach and communications, plus a strong web presence, can assist greatly in spreading the refreshed brand message. By implementing some of the practical tools outlined here, company marketing executives can start to create a plan for putting a fresh face in front of their own key audiences and sending a clear message that reflects ‘why we do what we do’.

Reference

APPENDIX
Action steps to consider for the rebranding process

(1) Gather insights through research (longitudinal studies point to brand equity demise and qualitative studies determine what is right, what is not):
   a. What is sacred?
   b. What is flexible?
   c. What needs to go away?
(2) Before rebranding, make sure the brand strategy is spot on (see goals for rebranding in introductory section above).
(3) The creative brief:
   a. Do the thinking upfront and then distil to the most important points.
   b. Provide common ground for all communicators.
   c. Evaluate the brief.
      (i) Does it capture the brand strategy?
      (ii) Is there commodity language in the brief?
(4) Start with concepts and filter out those that fail:
   a. On strategy?
      (i) differentiating;
      (ii) memorable.
   b. Evocative/inspires emotion?
   c. Authentic? Can it be backed up with truth?
   d. Does it link to what is sacred and move away from what’s dying?
   e. Is it extendable?
(5) Execute:
   a. Work with outside agencies/communicators to push out messages.
   b. Communicate internally with customer touching internal staff.
   c. Announce changes to customers.
   d. Utilise public relations to shift brand perceptions.
      (i) The more you are stretching the brand meaning, the more important this is.
      (ii) Protect authenticity.
(6) Measure:
   a. Monitor appropriate benchmarks to gauge impact:
      (i) sales;
      (ii) site traffic;
      (iii) overall growth;
      (iv) employee satisfaction;
      (v) other — company-specific.
   b. Give enough time to gather actionable data.