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Constructing Your Brand

There's a new way to build the foundation for success

By Randall Smith

Developing a brand for the architectural, engineering, and construction industries is like the construction process itself. Careful planning and a step-by-step process are needed to lay the foundation and build a company and its brand.

Competition in commercial construction has focused attention on branding strategies in order to gain a strategic advantage. But branding is much more than an attractive logo or catchy phrase. Though there is no standard definition of “brand” or “branding” within the general public, or even within the industry, adherence to branding principles can unify a company’s core brands and establish the strongest possible perception in the customer’s mind.

For many building companies—from architects to specialty contractors—the branding process can be a soul-

searching odyssey, defining who they are, what they stand for, and why customers should trust their products and services.

Principles of branding

Behavior. Perception drives what a customer thinks, does, and ultimately buys. Despite different perceptions, no one discounts the cumulative effect of the company image as seen through a managed brand. Customers encounter brands by visiting a Web site, seeing a company letterhead, meeting in its offices, or talking to a receptionist. How do these encounters make the customer feel? To be effective, brand efforts must permeate every level of an organization and every point of a customer’s experience.

Think about the perception of your

customer who is about to contract with you for a project. That client is interested in purchasing a building, floor, driveway, or other structure that he perceives as a good value and one that meets his needs. To choose your company’s services, that customer must feel confident because of the trust you have established. That trust comes from word-of-mouth, referrals, and perhaps a company’s awards, accolades, public relations, or news coverage. However, for most firms to reach that stage of market maturity, they must first reflect quality and satisfaction, not only in products and



services, but in their brand as well.

How potential customers feel is important. What is their perception? People seek to connect with the brand. To help customers connect, companies in the design and construction industries must develop brands appealing in quality but emotionally as well. Brands should be thought of as a set of values implied by the product, service, or experience. A brand is not merely the symbol—usually an artifact—such as a logo. Symbols only manifest the brand. In other words, all the values associated with the brand, good or bad, are brought to mind when the symbol is seen.

Brands, like reputations, must be maintained. A white paper published by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (www.aiga.org) describes the process of maintaining reputations or brands in a dynamic and evolving environment as “largely, an art,” though one with defined edges.

Technically speaking, a brand is not created by designers or other professionals. It is created in the minds of customers, audiences, and participants through experiences with the brand. It is not a logo, corporate identity, or a product. Rather, a brand is a gut feeling about a product, service, or company. That feeling refers to what customers feel, because in the end, the brand is defined by them and not by its company or owner, in other words, a brand is not what you say it is, but what your customers say it is.

Finally, brands are multifaceted experiences that can be created only by multidisciplinary teams. Branding teams may include designers, marketers, research analysts, strategists, and other consultants who shape the eventual outcome.

Developing a brand: A five-step process

The stages in brand development can be thought of as the five D’s.

Discovery. This stage looks at the situation today and how it will unfold tomorrow. How is the brand perceived? Figure out where the brand stands before you decide what direction to take. What are the brand’s strengths and weaknesses? Opportunities and threats? What are the strategic goals behind existing marketing efforts? Who are the primary targets and how do they behave? This is the investigative and research phase. Armed with these new insights, you can talk to the competition, vendors, and customers.

Distillation. Once you determine where the brand is now and what it is to become, discuss how to get it there. What tactics are appropriate for achieving the strategic goals? What tonality and aesthetic are appropriate for the target? What is the brand contract (see sidebar), the target’s “take away” after engaging the brand? What’s necessary to accurately measure success against strategy? What’s necessary to continue

the relationship once begun?

Comb through industry trends and societal clues for new concepts to revive ailing brands or upon which to base new ones. In this phase, identify opportunities in the marketplace through sifting, sorting, organizing, and segmenting the information gathered during the discovery phase. For example, branding positions identified in advertising from both competitors and nonindustry sources may be analyzed to develop a pallet of images for both analogous and contrasting comparisons. The solutions that result must be in line with the values and lifestyles of the target market.

Depiction. Your answers to the questions in the Distillation step will provide a direction that can be confidently pursued. The direction is depicted in the form of a Concept Board and is the final step in the pre-design process. The Concept Board takes the company’s complex business strategies and molds them into a visual/verbal representation that cues and triggers customer emotive values. “This is the “litmus test” against which all creative

Traditional vs. Modern Branding

Although a traditional approach to branding may accurately gauge current market conditions within the industry, it fails to evaluate the meaning and future of those conditions. Modern techniques monitor cultural changes, values, and marketplace trends with intuition and intelligence to create responsible and courageous solutions.

Traditional branding describes the relationship between the company and the customer as a promise to deliver. Brand-design programs require the formulation of a written brand promise that specifically states a company’s commitment. For example, International Truck and Engine, which recently implemented a significant branding program, summed up its commitment in this succinct, 20-word brand promise: “International listens, understands, and delivers the best ways to move our customers ahead. On the road and in their business.”

More recent branding philosophy suggests contract law as a more useful model. As opposed to one-way promises, two-way contracts require both parties to fulfill their responsibilities. A successful commercial building brand both gives and asks for commitment from the customer.



Dunn Associates' logo uses the optical properties of a classic illusion to suggest the problem solving abilities of a structural engineering firm that is different by design." The identity solution retains the visual equity from a previous version of the firm's logo.

DUNN ASSOCIATES, INC

Consulting Structural Engineers

When modern8 designed the identity for Associated Brigham Contractors, the ambiguous "General Contractors" was replaced with the more powerfully leveraged "Structural Concrete" to brand the company with its expertise.



Adapting the first letter of the company name references Owell's precast concrete products, uniquely branding the nature of the business. Typographic and color standards add to the identification.



Verti-crete developed the shield design for its logo out of a 3-D depiction of the fence products made from the company's molds and forms. The traditional look and feel was an intentional attempt to bring some time-honored values to what was actually a new company.



decisions are measured, keeping the work focused and on-strategy.

Design. The most obvious and the most easily understood step, design is also the most difficult. The best designers recognize the importance of the strategic questions that precede creative efforts and incorporate those findings into the solution. Technology has made design easier and more accessible for neophytes and professionals alike, but the easy lure of technology has pitfalls. To do it yourself or to engage someone who doesn't know how to bridge the gap between strategy and design is a mistake. Look for a professional with experience and don't micro-manage the creative process. The investment in a successful brand identity will pay off with increased value over time.

Deployment. When the brand has been developed, put it out there: post it, print it, and publish it. Immediately after launch, begin to generate findings. More questions will emerge from this valuable data that will continue focusing on the most efficient, effective way to meet the brand objectives. No matter how much brand designers design and name, if a brand isn't viable or sustainable, it won't be strong enough or successful. On the other hand, well-managed and well-executed brands that keep business objectives and the target audience in mind will effectively capture the customer and maximize your return on investment. ■

— Randall Snith is president and creative director of modern8, a Salt Lake City-based firm that specializes in brand design and consultation services for the built environment and that has developed the proprietary process of "Perception Branding." More information is available at www.modern8.com.