

Cooking up a brand strategy

Tony Manning

How much money will you squander on “brand-building” this year? How long will you kid yourself that the logo you paid so much for will grab customer’s attention, separate them from their cash, and bring you the Holy Grail of business: a “sustainable competitive advantage?”

Did you read me right? Did I really suggest that brand-building is a waste? What heresy! After all, everyone knows that brands are the future, brands are the “better mousetrap” of the information age, brands are the ultimate competitive weapon.

Ad agencies, designers, corporate image specialists, and even PR people have told us this for years (ironically with precious little success, given their supposed expertise in this area!) But recently branding has become a very big deal.

Logic says it’s critical in a hyper-competitive arena. But the dot-com boom gave it sex appeal. As the market in vaporware and daft business models took off, so did the idea that brands are an asset. Suddenly everyone wanted one. Suddenly there were brand gurus everywhere. Suddenly “we’re building our brand” became a catchall phrase to explain just about any activity, justify any budget, and provide cover for lousy sales and profits.

Today, companies with no sales boast about their “brand power.” Managers talk earnestly about “our great brand” when all they’ve got is a symbol that only they understand, a snappy slogan that won’t sell anything – and zero awareness in the marketplace.

Let’s get it straight. Brands can be a good investment. Branding can help you stand out in a cluttered marketplace. Brands may impact on your company’s market value. Branding demands serious thought, effort, and financial commitment.

But many firms’ efforts at brand building are utterly misguided. They’re based on flaky thinking and dumb strategies, and rest on flimsy foundations.

So maybe it’s time to draw breath. If you’re serious about branding, maybe you should take time out for lunch or dinner, and chat to a real expert.

My choice for both food and advice would be Dario De Angeli, celebrity chef, owner of Yum restaurant, and author of one of the hottest cookbooks around.

The reason is simple: not only has he built a formidable clientele in a crowded field, he also understands exactly what branding is all about.

In just three years, De Angeli has captured the imagination of serious foodies, and grabbed a valuable share of their entertainment spend. And he’s done it with no formal training, no big budget, and no sophisticated research, positioning studies, or promotions.

So what has made his restaurant a favourite? What makes it stand out from its neighbours in Greenside, Johannesburg – fabulous places like Circle, Ma Passion, Kharm, and Café Flo?

De Angeli works hard to promote his business. He uses a small promotional firm to help get media coverage. He produces biscotti under the Yum label, which are sold in BP service stations and Thrupps grocery store. His cookbook (called Yum, of course), quickly became Exclusive Books’ best-seller in the category.

But noise doesn’t make for long-term success. The cleverest marketing in the world won’t work if it’s not based on a product or service of real value to customers.

“The brand is always the secondary thing, says De Angeli. “You have to put the product first.”

He understands the importance of focus and consistency. Yum duck is his signature dish. Yum salmon is becoming equally famous. Both are always on the menu.

He also understands the value of surprises. So he’s made a point of becoming known for inventiveness – for example, a sushi foie gras starter; “Which is pretty bizarre, if you think about it.”

De Angeli is single-minded about making the total Yum experience one that diners will not only come back for, but also talk about. He knows that ultimately, word-of-mouth is the most powerful promotional weapon. So the Yum “product” also includes smooth, unpretentious service and pleasant surroundings. “I’m always here,” he says, “and so is my mother, Del.”

Can that be all? Aren’t these just the basics that every restaurant should offer?

Of course. The problem is that they don’t. Just as most other firms let themselves down, by doing everything but the few things that really make the difference.



Getting the basics right: Yum’s Delio De Angeli and his mother, Del

Samsung understands this. It’s now one of the world’s most valuable brands – and the fastest-growing. But if its growing reputation comes partly from massive promotional spending, the real gains come from innovation and quality in its products.

Sony, Dell, Coca-Cola, Nokia, and Unilever also get it. So do Makro, Bell Equipment, and Moneyweb. All these brands are top-of-mind with customers not just because of the promises they make, but rather because of the promises they can make. They get the basics right. So they deliver.

A lot of companies could safely stop their brand-building efforts, if instead they refocused on their “right customers,” re-thought their value propositions, and redesigned their business models. Followed, of course, by brilliant execution.

The goal: a clear target, a clear message, and delivery on the promise 100 per cent of the time.

Of course, you know all this already. But why not actually try it?

Start by getting your basics right. Then make as much noise as you can. Your branding budget will start to work. And like Yum duck, your brands will be on everyone’s lips.

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