

Be Truthful About Your Brand

By: **Matt Huss**
Senior Strategist

www.siegelgale.com

+ The marketplace for most products and services is becoming more transparent.

For more information contact us:

New York
T 212 453 0400

Los Angeles
T 310 312 2200

San Francisco
T 415 284 9715

London
T +44 (0) 208 735 8950

Hamburg
T +49 (0) 40 369 07-602

Dubai
T +971 4 4258600

Shanghai
T +86 138 1630 9232

In a world of big promises and increasing skepticism, building a strong corporate brand starts with understanding the truth about your organization.

Ever feel like the world of marketing and advertising has become one big, steroid-infused cheerleading competition? Whether you're in the airport, in front of the TV, or driving to work, high-powered taglines and marketing messages seem to be everywhere. Just recently, I came across the following chest-beating lines in the span of about one hour: "Unlike any other" (Mercedes), "Experience success" (Salesforce.com), "High performance. Delivered" (Accenture), and "Going beyond expectations" (Malaysia Airlines).

All good, you might say. As branding and marketing professionals, our job is to build brands that create connections with our buyers and help them express themselves, accelerate their careers, and live more exciting and fulfilling lives. Taglines and marketing messages help create the image we want customers to associate with our products consciously and sub-consciously. And, there's no doubt that the companies using the lines I just listed have had a great deal of business success. Fair enough.

But, with the continued growth of the online world, the marketplace for most products and services is becoming more transparent. Customers are more informed and empowered than ever. They're sharing information. They have higher expectations for what they buy and the buying experience. They're getting savvier. And, they're increasingly skeptical of messages that tell them about the next great thing.

Meanwhile, a similar phenomenon is taking place **inside** of companies. Employees are sharing more information, expecting more from their employers and from their workplace experience, and becoming more skeptical of big promises from executive management. Many employees have been through corporate initiatives and re-brandings, and have seen enough flavor-of-the-month programs to leave them thinking "yeah, right" when they hear about anything new. This is a big deal. Employees are the tip of the spear when it comes to delivering a great customer experience.

So, the question is—what can your organization do to build a strong brand that connects with both your customers AND your employees, given the evolution of today's market and workplace? At Siegel+Gale, our answer is simple. Look within and start with the truth.

1. Tap into your company's culture

Many companies do little to really understand what makes their people tick. In today's world, knowledge about your culture can be translated into a powerful competitive advantage. Make a concerted effort to truly understand which traits, talents, aspirations, and idiosyncrasies your employees share. Dig down deep into your culture, and use it as a springboard for developing innovative products and serving customers in interesting, new ways.

Take the fast-moving online retailer Zappos as a best-practice example. The company's CEO, Tony Hsieh, sees culture and the brand as one and the same thing: "At Zappos, our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff—like great customer service, or building a great long-term brand, or passionate employees and customers—will happen naturally on its own."¹

Zappos has 10 core values, including “Deliver WOW Through Service,” “Create Fun and A Little Weirdness,” and “Be Adventurous, Creative, and Open-Minded.” The company celebrates its off-beat culture and has built its hiring practices around its distinctive set of values. Potential hires must go through an hour-long “culture interview” before they even interview for their position, and they’re eliminated straightaway if there isn’t a strong cultural fit.²

By finding the right people and giving them the freedom to be themselves and think independently, Zappos empowers its employees to deliver an exceptional customer experience. Customer service representatives go above and beyond on a regular basis—from throwing in free socks with shoe orders to sending flowers to customers. At Zappos, employees do whatever it takes, every day.

2. Understand what your company is really good at

Against the backdrop of big promises and increasing skepticism, you need to know how customers and employees really perceive your brand—the good, the bad, and the ugly. But you can’t do this alone. Hire an experienced third party that can give you an objective, accurate assessment of the strength of your brand vis-à-vis the competition.

One thing to consider: standard brand equity research methods often ask customers about how they decide between brands. In our experience, we’ve found that customers themselves do not tell the truth—yes, even customers!—when surveyed using traditional techniques. They often tell you what they think is the “right answer” or what they think you want to hear. So, make sure you choose a partner that can distinguish between how customers actually select one brand over another versus what they claim to choose.

At Siegel+Gale, we’ve developed a powerful tool called EyeOpener™, which helps uncover how people really make decisions and choose between brands. We’ve used EyeOpener in B2B and B2C environments to help a variety of clients get a clear, nuanced understanding of what drives their customers to select their brand over the competition.

3. Focus on changing behaviors, not just telling a story

Companies tend to focus too much on telling the world about their brand through advertising and communications. While communications certainly have an important role, they should not be the sole focus. Invest more energy in devising meaningful ways to build the brand into your organization. Go beyond the key tags and the wallet cards to identify where the brand will have the greatest impact.

Recently, Siegel+Gale helped a client in the transportation business re-build their performance evaluation measurement tools from the ground up to align with their brand strategy. Employees now have a clear idea of what they’re being measured on and why it’s important. And the company is poised to better leverage its people to drive growth, innovation, and achieve its business objectives.

For a client in the architecture business, Siegel+Gale developed a series of compelling, actionable posters as part of a company-wide brand alignment effort that translated the company's five brand values into a series of thought-starting internal communication pieces, including posters, a brand film, and a corporate voice book. The brand alignment program continues to be a big success, and the client is thrilled about the extent to which the posters resonated with and inspired employees to "live the brand."

Finally, as branding and marketing professionals, we talk a lot about differentiation as the central aim of brand building. Differentiate or die, we like to say. But at Siegel+Gale we believe that differentiation is better thought of as an outcome—as something your customers perceive—rather than a strategy in and of itself. Different isn't necessarily better just because it's different. We take inspiration from the words of Jim Collins and Jerry Porras:

"You don't create Disneyland, build the 747, pursue six-sigma quality, invent the 3M Post-it notes, institute employee stock ownership in the 1880s, or meet with a store manager on your deathbed because the outside environment demands it. These things arise out of an *inner* urge for progress. In a visionary company, the drive to go further, to do better, to create new possibilities *needs no external justification.*"³

We believe that your company should focus on defining what it truly stands for and what it can truly deliver, and then focus on going to extraordinary lengths to deliver. As the needs and expectations of customers and employees continue to evolve, doing so will be more important than ever for building a strong brand.

References:

1. "Your Culture is Your Brand," by Tony H. (CEO) on Jan 3, 2009 in CEO and COO Blog43 comments <http://blogs.zappos.com/blogs/ceo-and-coo-blog/2009/01/03/your-culture-is-your-brand>
2. The Zappos Way of Managing:
<http://www.inc.com/magazine/20090501/the-zappos-way-of-managing.html>
3. Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, "Built to Last"