

B2B Versus B2C Branding

By Ray Baird

Is there a real difference in business-to-business branding versus business-to-consumer?

Throughout our business career, people have continually asked us, "What's the difference between B2B and B2C branding? Is there one? And if so, what do corporations need to know to help influence positive change in their business?" I must say, we've heard many strange answers throughout the years—not only from experts in our field, but from some of the largest, most successful B2B companies. The purpose of this communication is to give you our views on the differences between B2B and B2C branding and how successful B2B companies can leverage this understanding to increase the value of their business.

Basically, in order to effectively answer the question (or at least give you sufficient rationale), it's best to examine three critical components of the process, approach and ultimate outcome:

1. The heart of the buying influence and the strategic complexity
2. Sales channel/distribution alignment and communication
3. Brand relationship

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY:

True differentiation at the heart of the buying influence.

Unlike packaged goods and retail, where product branding really got its heritage, B2B branding starts with a premise far more complex. Let's start by thinking about a typical B2B company, such as Toyota (the forklift division). The purchasing decision is multidimensional; decision makers may include an influencer (possibly the drivers), a gatekeeper (most likely purchasing) and a specifier or champion of the decision. Unlike most consumer brands that are impulse- or single-minded-influenced, the B2B decision-making process can be multifaceted and take months to reach a conclusion. Which brings me to a critical point: most typical consumer purchases (except for maybe a house or car) do not require the great amount of research, negotiation and shared decision making as typical B2B decisions. And (thankfully) you can't lose your job by making a bad decision on what type of shampoo or cat food to buy or which restaurants you choose to frequent (or at least we hope not). The magnitude of how decisions are made in the B2B world take on a different strategic mindset, with sometimes a hundred points of communications before the sale is consummated. Therefore, one key factor to effective B2B branding is truly understanding all of the touch points that can ultimately affect the decision-making process and to make sure the competitive advantage and brand differentiation is clear and evident in all communications.

It is this complexity, spread over many different departments within a corporation, that makes B2B branding considerably different from B2C. It requires a skill set much different from packaged goods or retail product branding to consumers. Business must have a highly effective strategic orientation, one that gives visibility to the current communication status on a client-to-client basis for the greatest



impact. Disciplined strategic approaches and customer monitoring and metrics are essential to having and maintaining long-term successful client relationships. Just think, one small breakdown in the process (a late proposal, bad sales meeting or billing issue) can negatively affect the entire organization's reputation for the years to follow.

One technique RiechesBaird has used successfully is an innovative Touchpoint Mapping® process: a scientific way to chart out the entire process, evaluate the current experience and incorporate strategies to align the experience with the brand promise. Imagine being able to look at the entire customer experience on your conference wall. Imagine understanding the customer perception at each point of the process and then directing your marketing efforts to monitor the experience. In the case of American Airlines Cargo, they successfully identified the current experience through advanced customer Touchpoint Mapping and have embarked on a journey to create the ultimate customer experience—a brilliant way to create a competitive advantage that can be quantified, nurtured and merchandised across the entire organization.

THE SALE:

Channel distribution and communication strategy is where these two business approaches divide.

Another core difference, most people would agree, is the sales or channel approach to brand communication. Distribution strategies dramatically change the way B2B and B2C agencies communicate with their audiences and the types of media used. The major difference is the type of media and creative it takes to drive demand. Most advertising agencies for B2C clients traditionally relied on proven pull-through approaches like broadcast, radio and print to drive customer demand. Agencies over the years have striven to produce outrageous creative in an effort to break through the mundane messaging we've all come to despise. So, in essence, B2C agencies are highly focused on producing the next best creative to drive their customers' business (big gamble). The automotive industry is famous for this—spending hundreds of millions of dollars on innovative and creative techniques that are way off strategy or have no point of differentiation. When's the last time you remember seeing a car commercial that connected with you? Can you even recall a recent good commercial? And with the going rate of an \$11-million-a-year budget to successfully introduce a typical consumer product in the United States, this becomes a hit-or-miss proposition. This is why so many consumer product and retail brands come and go and why retail and consumer advertising agencies remain in business.

Unlike in the B2C business, marketing to the B2B world cannot afford to gamble with its long-term corporate reputation to the degree of consumer packaged goods or retail brands, which typically have a shorter shelf life. Also, think about the customer for most B2B businesses; it's usually not the end user. In traditional distribution or dealer models, it's the business customer that's most influential. Therefore the approach becomes more collaborative and commutative with its partners.

Let's take, for example, one of the fastest-growing kitchen and bath faucet companies in the United States, named Rohl. After successfully repositioning them to own "Authentic Luxury for Kitchen and Bath," the main objective was to clearly establish the strategy within existing and new channels. Once again, understanding every touch point was critical to determine the influence of each medium, which



ultimately drove the spending strategy. In their case, making sure “Authentic Luxury” permeated through the dealer communication was critical.

Keeping a strategic focus on dealer communication is paramount for B2B businesses to deliver on differentiated promises. So, as you can imagine, massive efforts must be focused on driving, maintaining and measuring the dealer experience to end users. In addition, the organizations need to make sure every department understands how they contribute to their value proposition and competitive advantage to ensure the message is authentic and believable.

BRAND RELATIONSHIP:

Day after day it gets more personal.

Unlike the other two examples that clearly demonstrate the differences in approach, process and strategy, there is a softer, intangible aspect to discuss and ponder. It’s about people. At the heart of almost all B2B business brands are people interacting together and experiencing the constant expression. This is a huge difference as it relates to the personal interaction and communication. On the one hand, B2B brands live and die by personal representation. On the other hand, consumer package brands have a different expectation. I don’t know about you, but I never have had the expectation of meeting Chef Boyardee (is he even a real person?) or I never really thought about who owns Barbie.

The point is, sometimes it does not matter. Unless the makers of those consumer package goods do something wrong or get in the way of good communication (OK, Mattel has had some recent issues), most of the time, the only expectation I have is of the product and the service that may be needed. On the flip side, if I’m dealing with a high-stakes purchasing decision in the B2B brand arena, you can bet the corporation’s brand will come into major consideration. Questions arise like, “How long have they been around?” and “Who do they work with?” and “What’s their philosophy?” In addition, the executive leadership of B2B organizations can become extremely important. John Chambers from Cisco is an extraordinary example of this case. His ability to articulate the future as it relates to the Cisco innovation position is legendary in the marketplace. Bottom line, people are one of the most valuable assets in branding for B2B.

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