Three-Dimensional Branding

Using Space as a Medium for the Message

Since all cattle look pretty much alike, ranchers soon learned to scorch the hides of their animals with a branding iron, forever distinguishing the product they wanted to sell from their competitors.

Today, many products look pretty much alike, and savvy marketers are still using brands. Now, however, the goal is to burn a distinct impression in the minds of consumers, one that clearly sets the well-branded product apart from the rest of the herd.[1]

But whereas a brand on the open range primarily served to prove ownership, branding in the marketplace does much more. A successful brand is an unwritten warranty, a mark of integrity, a promise of intrinsic value—a whole litany of attributes that bestow a favorable reputation on the underlying product or company.[2]

That's not to say a brand's success is measured only by how many feel-good intangibles it plants in the consumer subconscious. The ultimate goal—the holy grail of branding—is something very tangible: to presell a product or service, creating the perception that there is no alternative.[3]

"Branding is not about getting your prospects to choose you over your competition," says branding guru Rob Frankel. "It's about getting your prospects to see you as the only solution to their problem."[4]

Case in point: Coca-Cola. If the problem is thirst, Coca-Cola is often seen as the only solution by soft

drink connoisseurs worldwide. That's why any discussion of successful branding usually includes The Real Thing—not so much as a beverage as a cultural phenomenon.

Look at it this way: If Coca-Cola fired all of its employees, sold its real estate, and canceled its contracts with bottlers, it would still have the equity of its brand. Coke's fixed assets are worth something like $7 billion, but its brand value alone is easily worth 10 times that.[5]

Branding: The Big Picture

So how does a company go about turning its product, its service, or even itself into a brand? Advertising agencies would have their clients believe that any winning brand rests on a foundation of clever slogans, memorable logos, and maybe some well-placed media buys. Granted, these marketing tools play a role in reinforcing brand identity, but they can't be expected to shoulder the entire load.

"A brand is best seen as a cluster of perceptions," says Barry Shepard, president of SHR Perceptual Management, a brand-building firm in Scottsdale, Arizona, "and the key challenge is to extend those perceptions to every point of contact with customers."[6]

That means living a brand, not just promoting it. And the only way to do that is by weaving brand building throughout the entire organization, incorporating it into business strategy, product design, customer service— even the office environment.[7]

The notion of branding an office environment may sound like an experimental concept, but in fact it has been practiced for years—at least on a limited scale. That's why law offices look different from banks, banks look different from ad agencies, and ad agencies look different from high-tech start-ups.

Now, however, architects and designers are digging deeper, seeking ways to showcase how one law office, bank, or ad agency is different from all the others.

"Every built project should start with the intent to communicate the brand," explains designer Kiku Obata of Kiku Obata & Company in St. Louis. "All elements that comprise a place— architecture, interiors, lighting, graphics, landscape— should be integrated to create an intuitive brand experience. This is not about applying the company
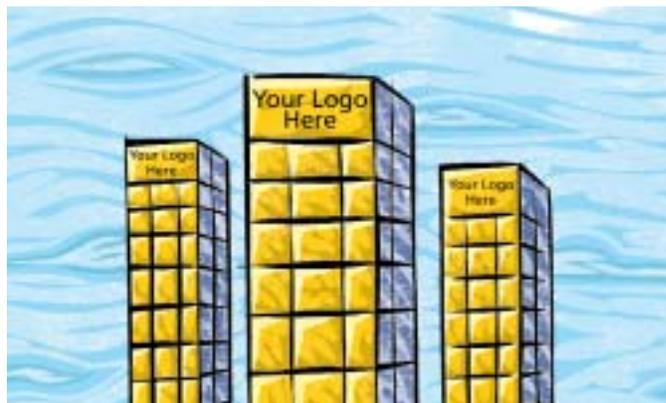
logo as an afterthought. It is about branding in 3-D."[8]

The Case for 3-D Branding

For many companies, three-dimensional branding makes perfect sense. Their rationale? The physical space used to conduct business—whether a store, satellite office, or world headquarters—is simply too visible and costly an asset to leave out of the brand-building equation.

Consequently, if brand is the message, space should be viewed as a medium for getting it across—sort of like a huge, dynamic billboard or perhaps an especially ambitious extension of product packaging. After all, the decisions that go into creating a company's physical environment—size, shape, materials, colors— share much in common with those that go into its packaging. Why, then, shouldn't both play a role in communicating brand?

The fact is space does play a role—an unavoidable one. A company's physical environment communicates a message whether intended or not. The only question is whether that message is carefully crafted to reinforce brand identity or left unattended to weaken it.

Another way to look at it: Based on other branding efforts, visitors bring certain expectations to the front door. What they see and experience inside will either validate or shake their preconceptions.[9] If a company says it's efficient, its workplace better be, too. If it boasts about being innovative, it better not be making do with outdated technology. And if it wants to be seen as the affordable alternative, it might want to keep expensive artwork to a minimum.

What's more, space is such a highly visual medium that its role in brand building is arguably that of principal actor, not bit player. Companies can talk and write

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about their brand all they want, but no amount of words will ever be able to put a dent in the impression created by one quick glance around an office or store.

In some respects, 3-D branding simply represents the next logical stage in the progression of understanding regarding the power of place. Long ago, virtually all companies bought into the idea that facilities had the power to influence workflow and productivity. Not so long ago, the influence of facilities on employee recruitment and retention became widely accepted. And now, companies are demanding even more, expecting their facilities to help define corporate culture and enhance brand identity.[10] As real estate strategist Martha O'Mara puts it, "Real estate and facilities fulfill two critical roles...the first is to physically support the process. The second role is the symbolic representation of the organization to the world."[11]

Because facilities give customers a physical experience of the brand, they affect results. Tracy Brower, a workplace knowledge consultant at Herman Miller, Inc., notes the connection she sees between space and outcomes. "It's simple but powerful," she says. "Space is one of the variables that goes into creating a customer's experience of a brand. When that experience, in all its forms, is positive, the customer perceives the organization's products or services to have quality. That, in turn, leads them to purchase and come back to purchase again."[12]

Positive branding relies on repeated experiences of an organization that communicate quality. These experiences are so important because, as David Aaker, author of Building Strong Brands, notes, "Perceived quality is the only brand attribute shown to drive financial performance." He cites several examples of the connection between perceived quality and results.

Studies using the PIMS data base (annual data measuring more than one hundred variables for over 3,000 business units) have shown that perceived quality is the single most important contributor to a company's ROI. It has more impact than market share, R&D, or marketing expenditures.

A 5-year study of 77 firms...conducted by the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan, revealed that perceived quality was a major driver of customer satisfaction, which in turn had a major impact on ROI.

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A study of 33 publicly traded firms over a 4-year period showed that perceived quality...had an impact on stock return, the ultimate financial measure. The study looked at American Express, AT&T, Avon, Citicorp, Coke, Kodak, Ford, Goodyear, IBM, Kellogg's, and 23 others...Remarkably, the impact of perceived quality was nearly as great as that of ROI...even when the researchers controlled for advertising expenditures and awareness levels.[13]

Organizational Associations and Brand Identity

Branding any corporate environment starts with intense scrutiny of the business itself and how it should be positioned. Consequently, it's not enough to solicit the opinions of facility professionals concerning a company's functional needs. Marketing people also need to join the project team early on to help define what message needs to be communicated, how, and to whom.[14]

The "to whom" part of the process is exhaustive. Three-dimensional branding has the potential to speak to multiple audiences—employees, customers, vendors, stockholders, competitors, and the community. Even more lengthy is the list of possible attributes to be conveyed: trendy, classic, green, innovative, efficient, affordable . . . whatever the brand message, creative companies will find a way to communicate it through their environment.[15]

In exploring how a company's physical space can enhance branding efforts, it's important to distinguish between product and corporate brands. Many consumer products—detergent, breakfast cereal, beer—boast a distinct brand identity anchored solely in their

specific attributes. The company behind the product is invisible.

For other companies—often, service firms or those that make big-ticket items like automobiles—organizational associations are integral to their core identity. Unquestionably, these associations provide credibility to the underlying products, yet they have a life apart from those products.[16] After all, an organization is usually more enduring than a particular product line, so any attributes associated with it are more difficult for competitors to combat than those associated with the products it makes.[17]

A closer look at some of the more common organizational associations illustrates how they can be reflected in a company's physical space and thereby help to enhance brand identity:

Society/Community Orientation
Organizations wanting to cultivate a reputation as good citizens can do so in many ways through their facilities. No fencing, no reserved parking places, clearly marked front doors, and attractive, well-detailed rear façades (which often face neighbors) are among the ways a company can portray itself as a good neighbor.[18]

Likewise, natural landscaping, imperceptible emissions and noise, and a compulsive attitude toward keeping the grounds free of litter should be top priorities for any company that wants to be perceived as environmentally friendly.

Quality
Quality is such an overworked word that it has become virtually meaningless as a branding characteristic. The problem, of course, is that when every company boasts about its "commitment to quality," eyes glaze over and no one really listens.

Stop talking about quality and start showing it.

One solution: Stop talking about quality and start showing it. Visual cues are far more believable than words—and what could be a more visual way of demonstrating that "we make good goods" than by reflecting it through striking architecture or an impressive office design?[19]

EDS, the information technology giant in Plano, Texas, provided visual evidence of its quality in the EDS Experience, a facility designed as a 3-D manifestation of the company's global reach and technical capabilities. The building houses various exhibits to educate visitors, but the centerpiece is a room best described as mission control, where technicians monitor a multitude of EDS systems. Though unspoken, the message to clients and prospects is clear: We have the infrastructure and expertise to support your business.[20]
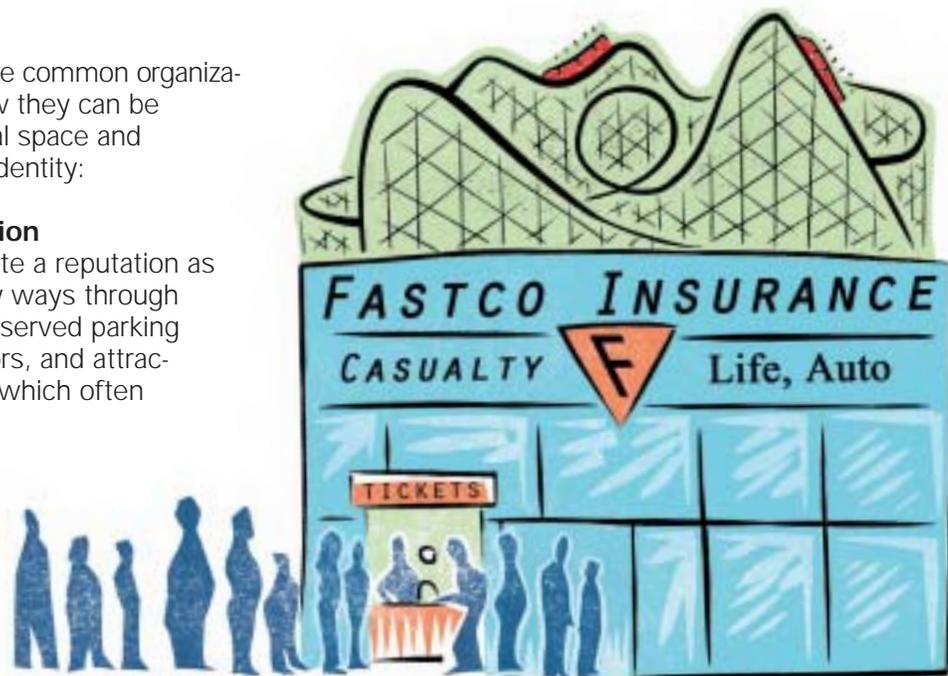
Innovation
Though especially important for technology firms, innovation is one attribute that just about all organizations would like to be associated with. The faster business moves, the more dangerous it is to be perceived as behind the times.

Consider Muzak, a company that once practically defined stodgy as the provider of background music in places like elevators and grocery stores. Seeking to jettison this image, Muzak undertook a major rebranding effort, sparking a renaissance that saw its sales soar and its client list increase.

When the company moved to Fort Mill, South Carolina, its new brand image came along. The experience starts immediately with the sound of music in the parking lot. Employees and visitors then walk through an entryway that transports them from a suburban industrial park to an urban city center in a few short steps.

Incorporating bridges, avenues, and skylights, "Muzak City" (actually a renovated warehouse) contains individual buildings that house a theater, cafe,

post office, meeting rooms, and offices. There's even a 4,000-square-foot city center with a stainless steel floor that looks like a compact disc.[21]

Carter's, a children's apparel maker founded in 1865, also had an archaic image to overcome when it repositioned its brand. The companywide effort extended to Carter's new Atlanta headquarters, which was designed to emit a visual energy that resonated with other elements in the company's rebranding program. This was accomplished, in part, by incorporating playful elements that capture the magic of childhood, including an iconic tree house and four distinct design villages linked by a "yellow brick road."[22]

Concern for Customers

Many organizations insist that placing the customer first is a core value. The question is how to communicate this message in facility design. One approach General Motors adopted was to first take care of the people who take care of its customers.

Mention call centers and most people think of sweatshops, but GM's customer relationship center in Austin, Texas, is anything but. The company's philosophy? If we want our employees to provide superior service, we need to provide them with a superior space.

GM's call center uses an open layout that facilitates communication between employees, so customer questions can be answered quickly. It also reinforces brand identity in a design scheme that echoes the energy and motion inherent in GM's advertising, right down to the bold graphic images on strategically placed billboards.[23]

Presence and Success

The visibility of the organization behind a brand can create an image of size, substance, and competence, especially important for high-tech firms that may not have a long history to reassure customers.[24]

When Datek, one of the original low-cost brokerage firms, consolidated operations in an office building on Jersey City's waterfront, the company wanted to be sure Wall Streeters could see it clearly from across the Hudson River. Designers made that happen by installing custom window shades that appear as black voids by day and—thanks to direct lighting from inside—turn the building into a can't-miss beacon at night.

Inside, the carpet contains Datek's logo and a subtle circuit board pattern, while materials such as glass, steel, rubber, and aluminum coordinate with the company's corporate colors to inject brand into every nook and cranny.[25]

Collaboration

Some organizations define their culture around the concept of collaboration, seeking to foster a "we're-all-in-this-together" mentality that makes the corporate whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Such was the case at Sara Lee Intimate Apparel when the conglomerate brought two competing brands together on one floor in Manhattan's fashion district. The CEO's marching orders to facility designers: Figure out a way to help people share ideas without losing the edge inherent in being competitors.

Designers pulled it off by configuring a wide-open floor plan and mixing personnel from both brands together—apparel designers next to apparel designers, pattern graders next to pattern graders, and so on.

Folks who needed a fair amount of privacy got it with tall, structural systems outfitted with sliding doors, while those who needed less found themselves in light, almost airy workstations that make it easy to see what's going on nearby. The new space contrasts sharply with the private offices and winding corridors predominant in the two it replaced, reminding employees of each brand that the old way of doing business didn't come along when they moved.[26]

Selling the Experience

To date, most of what passes for branding in the corporate environment revolves primarily around visual cues. There's some evidence, however, that the next frontier will extend much further, encompassing not only what people see, but also what they experience.

Experiences have always been at the heart of the entertainment business (think Walt Disney), but now the idea of selling an entertainment experience—not just a product or service—is migrating into businesses far removed from theaters and amusement parks.[27]

At theme restaurants like the Hard Rock Café and the Rainforest Café, the food is just a prop for what's known as "eatertainment."[28] Everything works together to create an integrated theme that engages the senses and leaves a distinct impression—even the memorabilia sold as a physical reminder of the experience. The cumulative result is not so much an enjoyable meal as a captivating storyline.

Meanwhile, stores such as Niketown and Recreational Equipment, Inc., draw customers by offering an interactive experience dubbed "shoppertainment."[29] Nike's flagship store in Chicago was conceived as the centerpiece of the company's brand identity, replete with arresting displays, high-energy music, huge video screens—even a half-court basketball floor—that all scream Nike. According to a company press release,

the store was "built as a theater, where our consumers are the audience participating in the production." [30]

Likewise, Recreational Equipment, Inc., better known as REI, took a similar tack at its hometown store in Seattle, where adventure sports enthusiasts can try before they buy. Architects incorporated a 65-foot climbing rock, a mountain bike trail, rain rooms, and other hands-on testing opportunities, producing an entertainment experience that quickly became one of Seattle's top tourist attractions.[31]

Even so, experiences are not exclusively about entertainment. Companies can stage an experience whenever they engage customers in a personal, memorable way. It follows, therefore, that the "experience economy" doesn't necessarily have to be confined to consumer industries. Although the move toward using experiences as a brand-building tool began with restaurants and retailers, it may well make the leap into business-to-business settings.[32]

Businesses like banks, insurance companies, and manufacturers will know they've landed safely in the experience economy the day customers are so eager to visit their workplaces that they wouldn't mind paying an admission fee. And if they sell those same customers a commemorative T-shirt or coffee mug before their visit is over, they'll know there's no turning back.

Until then, companies that want to break away from the pack can take a big step toward doing so by thinking of their physical environment as not only a place where works get done, but also as a place that sends a message.

Certainly, far more companies covet a distinctive, compelling brand than have been successful at creating one. By looking at branding from a three-dimensional perspective—a perspective that considers all aspects of business strategy, workspace included—many of those companies may get their wish.

Notes

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