



A Brand is Not a Shiny Object

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I never really understood the concept of branding until the day I learned that brands don't actually exist. You can't see, touch, taste, smell or hear a brand because brands have no tangible form and therefore can't be apprehended through the senses.

A lot of the things we refer to as brands – logos, design schemes, corporate identities, tag lines, product names, service directives, customer experiences, etc. – aren't brands, they're tools we use to shape brands, and understanding the difference between brands and the tools we use to shape them is extremely important. In an industry with steadily diminishing audiences, any brand discussion that takes place in the absence of this understanding is likely to be a waste of valuable time and resources.

Marketing guru Seth Godin [says](#) that brands are bundles of consumer expectations. You can't see bundles of consumer expectations because they have no tangible form. You can't experience bundles of consumer expectations through any senses because they exist in the minds and hearts of consumers. Your brand is the bundle of consumer expectations that surrounds your organization or product. It's how people who are aware of you think about you and whether they're inclined to respond to the promises you make.

The place where arts professionals get in trouble when discussing brands is the difference between the abstract, external bundle - Brand with a capital B – and the various tools we use to shape that brand. Unfortunately, the word 'brand' has been used historically to refer not only big picture Brand, but to a whole host of brand management tools so it's no wonder that so many people are confused. For a while there, back in the middle of the last century, the words 'brand' and 'logo' were virtually interchangeable so it's not uncommon to find older arts pros who can't quite get past the brand/logo association.

But today the word refers to the collective disposition of the marketplace toward the organization or its products. And the reason it's so important to understand the distinction between Brand and brand management tools is that good branding always begins *outside* the organization with an investigation into marketplace attitudes and expectations. The only way to know how to manage a brand is to measure it, and the only way to measure a brand is to research consumer expectations as they relate to the organization or the product in question.

Many arts professionals, however, because they don't distinguish between Brand and brand management tools begin the process by examining their tools to consider whether they need to be repaired, redesigned or sharpened, or whether they're the right tools for the job. The problem with this approach, of course, is that it makes no sense to sit around polishing your tools if you haven't bothered to learn what they're meant to do. The most gorgeous, exquisite, elegant logo in the world is meaningless if it wasn't designed in response to consumer attitudes and expectations.

So why do we spend so much time and money futzing with our brand management tools when we should be focused on what's happening in the minds of consumers?

Three reasons come to mind:

1. It's much more satisfying to sit in a conference room talking about things you can see than it is to talk about abstract concepts that can only be described in terms of dry market data. Who wouldn't rather watch the designer unveil her first round of logo ideas than pore over reams of research results? Both are necessary for serious brand conversations, but the research is far more important because it actually describes the Brand, while the logo design – which should come much later in the process – is just one of many brand management tools.
2. Agencies sell shiny objects. Agencies make a lot of money selling creative services so they tend to focus on the visuals that come with the branding process. Good full-service agencies will sell complete packages that include both research and brand development (better described as brand management tools development), but a lot of smaller agencies sell branding services that consist primarily of graphic design and marketing

message enhancements. The most effective agency is one that will devote the bulk of its energies toward gathering and analyzing market intelligence and then helping the organization respond with practical tools that will shape and *activate* the Brand. All smart agencies know, however, that abstract ideas – no matter how potentially useful or productive – don't sell agency services, and arts organizations will usually go with the agency that shows them the shiniest objects.

3. Arts organizations tend to be inner-focused. Unlike commercial marketers, we place far more faith in our products and in their inherent value than we do in our potential customers and their attitudes, tastes and expectations. We believe the arts transcend the marketplace so we tend to devote our promotional energies to extolling our products' virtues rather than responding to market demands. In the arts, we often bypass the marketplace entirely and develop our brand management tools as reflections of our own attitudes and values, which is why arts brands tend to be so exclusive.

If the arts are serious about growing audiences, we're going to have to shape brands that are broad, inclusive, enthusiastic and active. And to do that we'll need brand management tools that respond to and stimulate new audience expectations. The key to doing this, as far as I'm concerned, lies in looking past the shiny objects, achieving consensus on what the word 'brand' means, and making sure that whatever definition we choose asks us to think first and foremost about the audience.

To read Trevor's blog and download his e-book 'Marketing the Arts to Death' -

<http://trevorodonnell.com/>