

[Your name here]

Often dismissed as the territory of MNCs, branding should be an important element of every business, writes Róisín O'Sullivan.

There is no disputing that marketing budgets have taken a battering since the start of the recession and, while advertising budgets have been decimated, newspapers and magazines across the board have shut up shop. The reasons for this are numerous although the excuse most commonly called upon is that marketing spend is easier to cut than jobs, salaries or production costs. Yet many industry experts maintain that this is a destructive cycle in which a business that cuts its advertising budget feels the effects of its actions all the way down the line, eventually resulting in a loss of sales - be it in the short or long term.

This is one point upon which all of our

contributors are in agreement. "I actually think brand management is more important during a downturn," says Jack Dinan, founder and managing director of YAP Brand Consultancy. "In the good times, brand management can help fuel top-line growth and develop sticky customer relationships, which is great. But in times like this, when many organisations' survival is at stake, a well thought-through brand strategy can protect margins and market share in a cost-effective way, while at the same time building strong brand equity for the long term.

"This is critical when your existing customers are spending less, or there are fewer potential customers out there to go after. Also, branding should be approached with a long-term vision, and while flexibility is always important in business, business cycles are littered with knee-jerk reactions that demolish brand equity which took many years to build up."

Director of Articulate Design Ciara McCarthy is of the same opinion as Dinan. According to her, the key to surviving a recession is to stay ahead of the competition and a key factor in staying ahead of the competition is careful brand management. "Brand management is arguably more important in a downturn than when the going is good. You want your customers to form a lasting preference for your products and services, so firstly they need to be able to distinguish between you and the competition. Your brand is what identifies you in the marketplace and makes you recognisable to your customers," says McCarthy.

"If you establish trust in and loyalty to your brand now, it could be the difference between your business growing its customer base and your business failing because it's losing out to a more distinctive brand. The recession is weeding out businesses



Quoted in this feature

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indiscriminately. If your brand is strong and every interaction your customers have with your company is a positive experience, the support for your offerings over others will endure throughout the downturn and afterwards, guaranteeing you a long-term advantage in the market."

While director of Blue Neptune Adrian Kelly's argument is in a similar vein, he cites the protection of customer confidence as the most important driver behind brand management in a recession. "The brand has to be maintained and in many respects it is



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more important than ever to ensure that all the hard work and money that went into building the brand is not undone by no branding efforts during a downturn," he says. "For every business the confidence your customers have in you - that you're still there, still great, still a premium product or service is very important. In a harsh downturn like this one, any business that can portray the image and give the feeling of being consistent, solid, dependable, here for the long haul etc., is putting themselves ahead of the competition and is ideally placed to grow when the market lifts again."

"For the customers of the business it reinforces their feelings of being smart to have bought from the company in the first place. It reassures them of the quality of the products and services they have bought into and reaffirms what a smart buyer they are. For example, if a consumer sees that the brand of consumer electronics or car that they bought into has still got a strong brand presence during the downturn, it just makes them feel that they have indeed bought quality and are seeing the proof of that when the business appears to be still strong and sending strong messages to the market - regardless of the downturn," continues Kelly. According to Kelly, however, brand

management is not just for multi-nationals with multi-million euro advertising budgets. He warns that even the smallest of micro-businesses should be keenly aware of how they are viewed. "In my experience," he says, "the majority of the SME sector does not put any real emphasis on brand value. There seems to be a belief that brands are for the large companies of the world who have six and seven figure marketing budgets. Of course it seems to be forgotten that every company started out small and wasn't born a giant. The highly successful companies of the world have always used the power of branding to generate the 'buzz' around them, which helped them grow in the first place. They realised early on that the rewards for establishing a strong brand are enormous and, although it's an intangible thing, it certainly has a monetary value when it comes to a valuation of the business."

Andrea Kavanagh of Resonate Design has noticed this pattern more in business-to-business operations than in any other. "B2B companies in Ireland are definitely lacking in this area. This can be down to a belief that it's simply not required, or a lack of knowledge as to how to go about it. It can also depend on the size of the company and

whether they have the staff in-house capable of taking on these projects. Some companies may be under the illusion that brand value doesn't apply to them as they don't sell a physical product directly to a consumer, but brand awareness is vital for any company looking to grow their business."

Ciara McCarthy says that this pattern is changing though. "Smaller businesses tend to put less emphasis on brand value as budgets for investing in brand creation and management are smaller. However, executive level staff are starting to appreciate the value of branding and are moving in the right direction to ensure every point of contact with their customers is a positive experience. They are recognising that a brand is an asset to your business and can earn you money. If the personal interactions consumers have with your brand are consistently good, they will have a preference for your products or services over a competitor's. Consumers can also be more willing to pay a premium price for a brand they recognise and trust."

CREATING A BRAND

Research

But how should a business which has never given much thought to their branding go



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about building up their brand image? The most important thing is to consider your public image as it stands. According to Gearoid Bourke of Brand Box, no existing organisation is starting from the ground up when creating a brand. "It is important to understand that a business already has a brand, whether it is a carefully cultivated brand or not," says Bourke. "If you are in business you are in the business of developing and enhancing your reputation and every contact a business has with people will form a lasting impression.

"In order to have a brand that is clear, consistent and that accurately conveys a business's goals, intentions, direction and service, a number of questions must be asked and answered. A frank and open assessment must take place before a business can truly understand its own brand and its place in the wider market. Once a business understands its brand and how it is seen by its customers, building brand value becomes clearer by providing a base from which to develop a strategy to continue this process of assessment and enhancement"

Once you have familiarised yourself with your own image, the next task is to get to know your customers says Andrea Kavanagh. "A simple bit of market research is

a start. Find out how your existing customers perceive you and your product. Examine your competitors and find out what they can be doing better," advises Kavanagh.

Jack Dinan places a similar emphasis on the role of the customer in shaping a brand. "A business should have a crystal-clear understanding of their customers' buying criteria and behaviour. How important is the brand to your customers and is it balanced proportionally against tangible attributes like price, features and benefits? The correct balance is important for the customer to feel like they're getting value," says Dinan.

Christa McNally of Dunnhumby advises that, once a business gets to know its client base, it should remain flexible to adapt to their changing needs. "Listen to what your best customers are telling you. If your brand has hit a slump during the downturn in the economy, then it is the opportune time to better understand your brand's relationship with your customers. Use segmentations to identify, for example, which of your customers are more affluent and separate them from those who are more price sensitive, then 'speak' to them differently.

"Successful brand management is about driving brands and your best customers

through various economic climates. Strong brand leaders are responsive, not rigid, and develop relevant marketing programmes depending on customer need. Well-defined brands interact with each of their customers as individuals, not as 'economic indicators' or market averages. Brands can be recession-proof if the relationship they share with their customers is genuine, relevant, and reliable. Good businesses understand that customers define brands, not the other way around. Being a customer-centric organisation is critical to success," says McNally.

Consistency

Of course branding is not just about a logo or company colours. Branding is the way that a business presents itself in all of its transactions and how its name is subsequently greeted by prospective and existing customers. It therefore goes without saying that having a consistently good product is as important in this case as it is in other areas of business.

"A brand is a promise of something - a promise of quality, a promise of the level of sophistication, level of service, promise of great satisfaction or pleasure, promise of great efficiency, reliability etc. The

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advertising and all the other aspects of the marketing mix that a business uses has to be all making that promise of what the brand will deliver," says Adrian Kelly.

Roel van Veggel, general manager of RaboDirect, also urges organisations to carry that focus on their branding and image through to every part of their business - from product quality to the level of service they provide. "If you scratch past the surface of a brand and find all the work goes into the sales side leaving little for the service element, then it's unlikely to succeed," he warns. "The promise of the brand must be carried throughout the entire customer experience. Brands are so much more than just a logo. Getting a customer through the door is the easy part, it's how you treat that person afterwards that counts."

Ciara McCarthy agrees; "Every interaction a customer has with a business influences their perception of the brand. If your products are high quality and your staff courteous but your business stationery and website look shoddy, the overall impression is mixed. A business should focus on firstly creating a strong brand identity and then focus equal amounts of effort on brand strategy and management."

Be holistic

"Businesses who apply a holistic approach to customer focus - where policies, products and services are designed around their needs - will find that their brands tend to build market share more rapidly," advises Marie Reilly, director of Chaos. "A new brand must earn its stripes so to speak. It must grow into a position where it earns trust. A positive brand experience that measures up to customer expectations will increase its credibility and add to the brand equity. Successful brands also allow customers to assign their own meaning to a product or service, which gives them a feeling of ownership and self-expression. If the brand message is right it will foster belief in it, which will in turn instil a sense of ownership and belonging in customers and employees, generating positive behaviour towards it."

Good brand design

Although it's not the whole picture, there is no denying that brand design is a big part of brand management - as is obvious from the success of giants such as Coca-Cola, HP, Google and Nike. "Design is the face of your brand," enthuses Brand Box's Gearoid Bourke. "Your logo, identity, print advertising, marketing and sales vehicles,

and materials online or offline are often the first and most direct point of communication you have with existing and future customers. If a picture tells a thousand words good design will say more about your brand than any salesperson could convince you of. Good design is continually communicating your brand's message, 24 hours a day. As long as there are people to see it, whether at a glance or in detail, it is creating an impression of what a brand is and stands for. Good design grabs your attention, it forms connections and associations in the minds of its audience."

Marie Reilly agrees. "As the visual embodiment of the brand, the brand identity is often the first point of reference for the customer. Good design is essential for the successful promotion and placement of a brand and adds real value. Firstly, it clearly identifies a brand and differentiates it visually for the competition. Strong unique identities can also be trademarked to afford increased protection against competition and increased marketability. It can also help define the personality and character of a brand.

"The combination of logo symbol, colour and type style have a huge bearing on setting the tone of voice of the brand and a



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well designed identity will clearly reflect the brand's promise and encourage a positive emotive response. In customers this response can mean that 'want' supersedes 'need' and for employees it can encourage a sense of belonging and pride. In both cases it fosters loyalty and trust. Bottom line - good design is an investment in your bottom line," says Reilly.

But how can a firm ensure that its branding is this effective? The key is to choose a designer or design firm with the careful attention that you would invest in the recruitment of a senior executive. "Choosing a designer specific to your needs is important," says Andrea Kavanagh. "You need someone that understands your company and what it's trying to achieve, and who can also work within your budget and schedules. Not all companies are the right match, but it's a great feeling when you've built up a strong relationship with a client/customer."

This doesn't mean that every two man operation needs to employ a top designer though - simple and affordable design is often a better approach. "One of the most consistent mistakes I see all the time is businesses (usually SMEs) going for very fussy and overly complicated graphic designs

when coming up with their corporate logos, web designs and printed collateral," says Adrian Kelly. "The less is more principal is often forgotten. I see it all the time where an SME is trying to build marketing collateral around designs that are very clumsy and using far too many colours etc. The best brands are based on simple but very effective graphic designs, which keep the image very clear and distinctive. If one looks at the biggest brands in the world you will see they all use very simple graphic design, with minimum use of colour and simple shapes to convey their image."

Strategise

In most respects it seems that managing your brand is not that different to managing other areas of your business. It comes as no surprise then that, when it comes to questions of the future, industry experts tend to trot out the same mantra - the key, they say, is to strategise. "Strategy is the vital first step in effective brand management. Without building full alignment around your vision and business strategy, your brand is going nowhere," asserts Jack Dinan.

"I'd go as far as saying that trying to implement a brand strategy without a clear business strategy is nothing short of guess-

work. It's essential to understand where your business exists in relation to competitors and in the minds of consumers, and where you need to manoeuvre it in the coming years. As Lou Gershner, former CEO of IBM said, 'If you don't know where you're going, any direction will get you there.'"

Brendan Donlon of Design Tactics is in agreement with Dinan on this point. "Brand management is inherently strategic. If it's tactical or reactive, it weakens how customers perceive your entire brand - permanently. Strategic thinking is hard at the best of times, and is particularly hard when a business is scrabbling for sales, but it's the only way to protect and build a brand."

According to Gearoid Bourke, far from merely being unwise, failure to form strategies around branding can be quite destructive to a business's image. "Without a strategy you risk losing control of the brand. A strategy is determined from a clear understanding of what a brand is and does. It is a single clear direction that is communicated outwardly from management to staff and from promotions to customers. A strategy looks to the future and plans accordingly. Without it, brand messages risk becoming disjointed, unclear and confused." ■



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Brand your way back to growth

Better brand communication can measurably improve your business performance in slow economic conditions. Here's how.

It's been a hard year for Irish business, yet with no upturn on the horizon, many still seem set on hibernating in the hope of weathering the storm rather than finding a new direction. "It's a groundhog day mentality," says Brendan Donlon of Design Tactics. "If you don't change course now, you won't be in a position to benefit when things do turn around."

The Design Tactics team have been building brands and growing client revenue for nine years. They created the Java Republic brand, revived the brand fortunes of Waterford Stanley, and designed packaging for products like Dawn Juices and Freshways Sandwiches that changed consumer perceptions and boosted sales. They also work for Government clients like TidyTowns and Fáilte Ireland with equal effectiveness. From start-ups to blue chips, creative director Brendan Donlon has guided clients with a practical approach that aims for real results. That's why Design Tactics has won awards both for its creativity, and also for the boost it delivers to its clients' bottom lines.

Key steps to improve your brand

Donlon believes that better branding is a key weapon in battling declining sales. "Your brand is the heart and soul of your offer. If your customers have stopped buying, you can't just blame the economy." He suggests some key steps that every business needs to take to retool its brand for tough times.

"Firstly, stop worrying, and start doing. Every day you wait is another missed opportunity. But don't forget that a strong brand can only be built from a sustainable business model. If you're struggling now, don't bankroll your survival plans on a presumption that you'll return to peak performance. Do what you must to make your business viable now, and then start from there."

The next step is key. "Check your message and be prepared to change it. Does your brand reflect what your customers now want, and at a price they're prepared to pay? If not, it needs to be realigned without damaging your relationship with existing customers."



Brendan Donlon, creative director, Design Tactics

To do this, Donlon advocates mapping your customers and competitors. "You need to understand where your offer sits in the mind of your customers, and how they compare it to your competitors. The research services to find these answers are now excellent value, but if you're reluctant to invest, some candid calls to the right customers can deliver useful feedback."

The benefits of an emotive brand

Once you know how your offer is perceived you can make informed decisions on what needs to change. The key objective, says Donlon, is to convey benefits that are relevant, but also emotively appealing. "For instance, everyone is looking for value, but they're not happy to sacrifice service or quality to get it. Value is a subjective measure, informed as much by feelings as facts. If you can make customers feel good when buying, and long after they've bought, then price becomes one of many influencing factors, not the only one."

Similarly, brands need to take care when taking tactical measures to boost sales. "Price cuts and special offers are sometimes needed to jump-start cautious customers, but they mustn't damage your brand. If you go tactical, do so with an

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emotive and brand-led message. You can't incentivise purchase at the expense of your brand's long term value."

Your new brand strategy then needs to be designed, and Donlon makes the case for viewing this as an investment. "We're not immune to the pressure to provide value. We've always run our projects on a fixed-cost basis and have a history of delivering great results on any budget. Ultimately, brand communication is an investment that if done right, will generate a return. Great design makes your brand more convincing. It helps your message to connect. It builds trust and engagement with your audience. When that's backed up with a brand experience in sync with our creativity, you have a truly powerful sales tool."

The value of brand visualisation

Donlon also makes the case for using design as an R&D lab to explore new thinking. "Many of our clients first came to us with the bones of an idea which we then explored, visualised and made tangible. It's a fixed-cost, low-risk way of trialling new concepts, and has led to some very successful client ventures."

This service is also offered to prospective clients. "We can find ways to make any brand more effective. We offer an initial assessment without cost and can then create an exploratory visual presentation for a low introductory fee. It's a great way to show what we do, and to prove how strong your brand could be."

If he only had one piece of advice, what would it be? "Never stop talking to your customers. You have to keep reminding them what you do, and why you do it better. It doesn't matter if budgets are cut, you still have to sustain your customer engagement - or you won't have any customers. In the last year, we've helped clients to find creative ways to engage with their customers for less money. When it works well, we're lowering costs while increasing sales."

For more information or to book a free assessment of your brand communications, visit www.designtactics.net, phone 01 2079107 or email brendan@designtactics.net ■