

## Branding In The Digital Age

Branding has been a rather complex topic since the advent of brand named goods, originating with maker's marks on certain blacksmithing products, proceeding through guild-approved stampings on quality goods, and progressing into the names we know and associate with major brands, such as Chevy, Barnes and Noble, Starbucks, and Wendy's. Some brands are virtually immortal - manufacturer Beretta has retained its name since the 1500s, and continues to be a leader in the field of military armaments.

In many ways, branding is as much an art as it is a science, a technique of knowing how to read the mercurial moods of the purchasing public. In the age of the digital marketplace and an ever-connecting world population, new challenges and ideas present themselves to the savvy business. Anyone with a brand to promote must heed these signs or find themselves left behind.

### **Vox Populi**

An increasing trend in digital branding is the user-driven brand. Traditional branding relies on the parent company presenting a particular image they wish associated with their item - Chevrolet and Ford wish to project a brand associated with ruggedness, leading to the "Ford Tough" and "Like a Rock" slogans of the late 1990s. User-driven branding, on the other hand, appropriates an image cultivated from the product's user base and embraces it, allowing the people to choose how they associate with the brand.

### **Spelling Challenged Kittens**

Perhaps one of the most intriguing overnight branding success stories is that of the popular image blog, "I Can Haz Cheezburger?" LoLCats are user-generated images of felines in various adorable or questionable poses, with humorously misspelled captions attached. That is it; no product to sell, just funny images uploaded to social message boards and forum - the phenomenon began in earnest with the weekly 'Caturday' on the highly controversial site 4Chan.

Cheezburger was an effort to archive these pictures more permanently in a blog format, without the socially rambunctious atmosphere of some other boards, nothing more. Within two years the company was purchased for two million dollars, has created a number of products such as books and garments, and has gathered users' humorous misspellings into an actual Constructed Language project that is translating major texts. The brand is clearly associated with its humble beginnings, and continues to draw input from users - in particular, the LoLspeak project itself is entirely user-driven in a wikipedia style collective effort.

### **Trendy Kids and their Toys**

Apple's "Get a Mac" and "Mac vs PC" commercials are already entering into modern legend as far as branding efforts go. Apple was shunted aside as the standard home computer by the proliferation of Windows-based machines, and Mac users developed a reputation for the odd computing enthusiast.

However, just as the cultural image of the nerd and geek were slowly turned into countercultures and social trends of their own, Apple picked up on these movements and re-branded itself as the tool of the 'indie' kids eager for something different. While not as direct an example as with LoLCats, it still demonstrates the influence a user base can have on a brand that they personally identify with. An audience decided to embrace a certain image, and this image allowed Mac to launch itself into the modern resurgence it has enjoyed.

### **Dudes and Dells**

Recently, Dell Computers closed their popular Customer Care message board. These were user forums Dell set up in 1997 to cater to customers who weren't interested in fighting with telephone tech support, or wanted a solution other than hauling their PC across town to a big-box shop for repair and refit. The boards allowed users to contact actual Dell employees with their grievances, and were a major cornerstone of Dell's long-standing claim to superior customer service and support. Dell users spread their experiences by word of mouth and internet communication, and the Dell brand became synonymous with its dedicated user base.

When Dell announced the decision to close these boards in 2005, the decision caused a bit of an uproar. Longtime fans and users of the board protested en masse. Dell claimed good reasons for their decision - technical services were for registered purchasers, and the forums couldn't be made completely secure against identity theft when personal information was exchanged. However, the users still protested and raised equally good cases, citing story after story about how the Customer Care boards were part of the reason they had stuck with Dell so long. In a final compromise,

Dell chose to keep open their non-technical support boards so customers could still participate in discussions of Dell technology and practices, and share ideas with other Dell users. The people spoke, and Dell took the time to let their users continue to affect the brand.

### **The Big Picture**

Each of these three stories presents a case in which the customers shaped the destiny of a major brand. Is this the path for every company? Of course not. However, the Internet and the web provide companies with more tools than ever to reach their audiences. Word of mouth is more efficient than ever before, and customers can cause the rise or fall of major businesses through their online contacts. Companies interested in maximizing the effect of their brand should do more than 'look into' putting their goods on a website - they need to seriously consider letting their audience, the people that buy the brand, help define the brand.

### **About the Author**

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