

## Your People Are Your Brand

By Allan Steinmetz

A prospective client asked me the other day when I could meet to discuss our approach to brand building and the process for annual planning. This may have been an ordinary request from most of our clients, but this inquiry came from one of the world's largest strategy consulting firms.

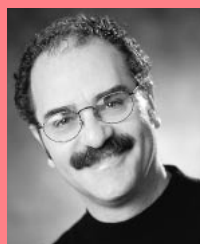
When we arrived, we were ushered into a huge, glass conference room with the walls adorned with expensive artwork, all original. If this was designed to impress people, they accomplished their goal.

What failed to impress me was the company itself. Here was a consulting firm whose business had grown fivefold in three years, yet it appeared to focus more on artwork than on enlisting its own people.

Nobody knew who this company was or what it believed. It had yet to make that connection that firms so desperately need. The corporate ad campaign did not define the company or distinguish it. The partners were working too hard for every lead when the leads should have come their way. The synergy between corporate marketing and functional/industry practices was nonexistent.

This billion-dollar giant was suffering from a classic case that plagues professional service firms — situations where partners have strong views on how to get things done, little consensus and an over-reliance on their individual behavior rather than the collective motivation and behavior of the firm.

Lacking understanding of the importance of internal acceptance, this company did what most big-name marketers do. It hired a big ad agency, which did a huge buyer insight study and came back to the marketing director with



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recommendations that justified the agency's own creative strategy opinions.

Like most companies facing this situation, its officials began to second-guess themselves and challenge what they knew best — their own judgment and smarts. They said to themselves, "After all, the ad agency did research. Maybe we should trust their instincts more than our own." They got into production and created the campaign. They presented it to their partners. The room fell silent — maybe polite applause. But in the halls, it got louder. "What do those guys think they are doing? They don't have a clue about my clients. How much money are we spending on this?"

Sound familiar? It should, because it is happening in every art-adorned, glass-enclosed professional services boardroom. Nothing will change until companies recognize the value of their people and of building consensus.

The company had no process for marketing and did not communicate its message effectively. In addition, it did not establish an identity, because it failed to enlist its people in the process. It did not matter whether they knew or understood the process. The goal was for this group to align its marketing and communications objectives to maximize the impact through its strategic media alternatives, with key messages targeted to the right channel at the right time with continuity. This approach requires a new mental model of how communications planning and marketing sales activities come together.

What this company needed was a comprehensive, integrated marketing/communications process that starts with a clear positioning and a sense of what it aspires to be, followed by a complementary positioning statement for each industry and functional practice. After that, it needs to develop a shared, integrated and tactical dialogue marketing program that drives clients to be aware of the firm, to consider the firm, to prefer and contract its services and, ultimately, to come back to the firm with repeat business.

An associated methodology called dialogue marketing would solve the problems. It is a process-driven methodology that their consultants could appreciate and understand. The program is divided into four phases:

- **Investigative/interview phase.** Interviews

with participants to determine opinions (both shared and divergent) and to articulate issues in advance.

- **Dialogue marketing workshop phase.** A facilitated two-day workshop with the leadership of the firm. The objective is to create a consensus-driven, brand positioning statement and dialogue marketing program. Tactics covered include ideas on awareness building, dialogue building, incentive marketing and loyalty marketing. The outcome will be a consensus-driven tactical plan, focused on the highly leveragable priority efforts.

- **Project management planning phase.** Consultants meet with marketing personnel to plot a tactical marketing plan and timetable that include sequential order of tactics, roles and responsibilities, a chart of tasks, production schedule, budgeting, etc.

- **Final report phase.** A final report that includes an analysis of the interviews, proceedings of the brand architecture/dialogue marketing sessions and the tactical communications marketing plan and timetable.

What matters is an educated work force that is motivated to get behind the marketing initiatives, inspired and proud to work for their firm because of who they are and what they do, and that feels so strongly about being part of the process that they spread the word to their clients and among the rank and file of their own organization.

I offer this advice to firms suffering from a similar problem:

- Start simple and don't complicate things.
- Get together the people who matter and come up with a vision that is distinguishable from the competitive frame.
- Define where you are today and where you want to be in three years.
- Get a clear sense of what your brand promise is — not just a new look and feel or a new brand identity.
- Get down to the core essence and the promise of the brand.
- Define your personality, as Apple Computer did in the 1970s or FedEx in the '80s.

It starts with companies addressing a simple question: "What does it mean?" Once that question is answered, make the necessary systemic changes so that people in the company act it and reinforce it every single day.

Your people are your brand, not just the advertising and slogans. ■