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Beyond the Big Bang

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Beyond the Big Bang:

THE BENEFITS OF BRAND STEWARDSHIP

We've all been there. Brand launch night. The CEO at the rostrum oscillating between smugness and uncertainty. A hush settling on the tight clusters of local dignitaries, customers and employees as drinks, nibbles and conversation are interrupted by commercial reality. A PowerPoint presentation is poised to deliver the company's new brand. The new identity is finally unveiled and a confident CEO explains how the brand heralds a new era in the company's evolution. The word 'passion' pops up frequently.

Such optimism for the new brand is, of course perfectly justified providing the same care is taken after its birth as before it. Sadly, this is often the point where the love and attention begin to wane. What promised to add value to the company and out-perform the competition, slowly but surely languishes through inattention and lack of on-going investment. You can see close parallels in websites. Everyone gets excited with the sexy stuff up to launch time and then fails to put in any meaningful resources post launch. So a year later you're still reading on the website news section about what a successful brand launch they had.

Given the extent of hard-earned cash invested in a new brand, doesn't this lack of resource commitment post launch seem almost negligent? To use a sporting analogy, would you pay good money to buy a well-sired colt and then expect it to beat all-comers without any nurturing or resourcing? I think not. The point here is that the launch is only the very beginning of the brand lifecycle. Brands cannot deliver instant gratification. Realistically, they take three to five years to get real traction in the market. This is the time it often takes to get a track record – i.e. sufficient quantum of customers recognising your ability to deliver on your brand promise. This is when you start to reap the rewards of your patient investment.

Another rationale for careful stewardship of your new brand is that they are susceptible to damage, especially in their infancy. One or two major failures to live up to the brand promise, while stakeholders are still forming their initial impressions can seriously curtail the brand's future prospects. Over time the company's point of difference is often blunted through multiple agencies giving the brand their own visual interpretation, replacement staff failing to appreciate the brand positioning requirements and inconsistent storytelling caused by the absence of guiding mechanisms.

Brand changes or refreshes should be catalysts for positive change, not simply outfitting the same body in a shiny new suit.

They are perfect opportunities to effect improvements along the length of the company's value chain. And it doesn't take too many attitudinal

and behavioural improvements at these various customer touch points to collectively add considerable enhancement to the brand. It's a matter of taking the time to delve into each work area, and involve the staff in identifying the positive and negative brand impacts and suggesting remedies. If this sounds a bit like hard work, bear in mind that your staff will eventually make or break your brand.

Of course, mention the word 'branding' to most of your staff and chances are you'll get the word 'logo' back or a look of general puzzlement. Perhaps as branders, we're guilty of not communicating what we do as well as we could. In any event, the sweep and potential of branding is not widely understood so it's only when we relate it to the 'nuts and bolts' of people's work areas and habits that the light gradually comes on.

Another common area where brands come unraveled is around design and communication. Without consistent treatment and message delivery you simply cannot expect to achieve a commonly shared stakeholder view of your brand. Largely unobserved by your stakeholders, there should be careful mechanisms in place which provide consistency in both visual and oral brand expression. Systems such as design and brand communication guidelines, managed image libraries and storytelling matrices that gate-keep effectively but don't stifle creativity.

If it's not obvious already, at Brian R Richards, we feel strongly about stewardship – to the extent that we have now developed an innovative brand management system (Brrand Workbench) that embraces all key aspects of brand stewardship in a very user-friendly fashion. We wouldn't deny that there is a value for BRR in making the case for brand stewardship but there's an infinitely greater rationale for companies. Because in today's competitive environment, the opportunity to add value, lift price points and outshine the competition almost inevitably falls to the brand.