

BY KEVIN O'DONNELL

CORRECTING THE BRAND BACKLASH

THERE APPEARS TO be a brand backlash underway that's increasing in intensity of late.

One author haughtily tells an interviewer that "brands are for cattle." A reviewer of another anti-brand book equates brands to "desperate marketing tactics to attract attention." And that book's author rails to a talk show host that "instead of focusing on customer service and better products, the name is more important than what's in the package."

Was there ever a concept that was so misunderstood? That has been so persistently and wrongly equated to tactics and names and the perennial bad guy, Big Business?

There's a difference between a brand and Brand, of course. Those with an elevated and, dare I say, more sophisticated understanding of Brand get that it's far more than a name slapped on a product and is shaped by far more than just slick advertising campaigns. In fact, Brand is the sum total of all the experiences—positive and negative—we have with the product, service, thinking, person, thing or business that is behind it.

Brand is everywhere. Communities have a Brand. People have them. Organizations that aren't businesses do, too. And in today's environment, those that don't try to manage their images—or who do so in a forced or inauthentic way—will find their images managed for them. And that can have damaging repercussions.

The recently completed Olympics gave China a chance to showcase the positive aspects of its nation that it hopes will define its brand and help counter the population, pollution and Chairman Mao associations. Beijing epitomized the yin and yang of the "new" China. On the one hand were gleaming, modern buildings, expansive, state-of-the-art athletic facilities and sweeping (not to mention incredibly well-swept) boulevards. Yet such positives still couldn't totally offset the lingering negative associations about China linked to the Tiananmen Square protests. Or that for all its Westernization, the brand that is China will always be as exotically flavored as the endlessly varied foods (fried centipede, anyone?) that were the focus of one broadcast feature.

Every attempt was made by the government to create an experience that would advance the perception and, thus, evolution of Brand China on this huge world stage represented by the Olympics. Of course, there were missteps—alleged underage gymnasts that spoke less to the spirit of the event and more to the quest to dominate the

gold—but on the whole, it was a successful exercise in that the nation's image was expanded and enriched with the exposure it received. And now that the nation has our attention, the "deeds versus words" maxim that ultimately holds true for strong brands will be more important than ever before for China to live up to.

And if there was any question that people had brands, consider our leading politicians, especially in what has been one of the most exciting presidential elections we've had in years.

From having no brand a few short years ago, Barack Obama has developed a brand that has grown almost larger than life with its promise for something "new" and change from the old order. He's reinforced that by deftly managing all facets of his identity. This has taken him beyond the superficial visual aspects with more telling deeds. His aggressive embrace of new technologies, for example, has been the foundation of his ability to touch millions with his message in a highly personalized way. This has been critical in helping to offset another facet of his brand that is polarizing: his race. And he's remained true, on the whole, to the niche he's carved and the brand promises behind his messaging.

This kind of forward thinking serves as a stark differentiator to the more "old-school" branded John McCain, especially as the campaign has evolved. McCain's age and the way he proudly eschews technology define his brand just as much as his "my country first" credo. But he's also seen as having shifted his brand positioning away from the maverick persona that was once an integral component of his brand to one that is more in line with the prevailing conservative party line. While that shift may, in fact, win him the presidency, many voters will also see it as a transparent compromise that's all too common in political circles.

Finally, organizations that aren't "selling" to the public but serving it also have a brand to uphold. And the proviso to stay true to the experiences and expectations that shape them prevail here as much as it does in any other space. In fact, it may be more important.

A series of missteps and reputation-battering occurrences dating back to 9/11 have tarnished the American Red Cross and brought into question its ability to deliver against the core representation of its brand—disaster relief.

After collecting \$1.1 billion to aid in the aftermath of 9/11, it shifted a substantial portion of that to hedge against future

crises. The move supported its mission but was a PR nightmare. People donated to support the disaster at hand. From there, the brand-damaging events just snowballed: Hurricane Katrina and perceived shortcomings in the Red Cross' performance in the aftermath. Federal sanctions against it for its blood-safety procedures. A \$200 million cash flow deficit. The very public ouster of a short-lived chief executive. Restoring donor confidence in the American Red Cross will be an uphill battle, but the organization has a strong brand platform to build on, from its strong core values, broad awareness and (perhaps sadly) the ever-growing need for its services.

Rail all you want. But brand is a fact of life, with implications that go far beyond marketing and advertising run amok. Those who insist it's merely window dressing are naïve, if not obtuse, and in some cases just guilty of slinging the byproduct of the bovines that represent their version of Brand. **m**



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