

Brand Differentiation—It's An Inside Job **3 Ways to Maximize Competitive Advantage!**

By Suzanne Tulien, Principal and co-Founder of The Brand Ascension Group

Business innovation never ceases to amaze me! Every day I see ads that blow me away when it comes to new ideas and state-of-the-art features and benefits of existing products. The problem, however, with differentiating your brand through product features and benefits is that those are easily copied by competitors. Once it catches on, 'poof!' -- no longer a differentiator.

Brands that are highly product based can't help but differentiate through features. I remember my jaw dropping when I saw an ad for the newest Maybelline mascara equipped with a tiny battery that causes the wand to vibrate! It's the first of its kind, vibrates 7,000x a minute, and has a battery life of up to 130 applications. I had to think, well, 'how else could they innovate mascara?'

But brands that have an opportunity to include service as part of what their customers experience have infinite possibilities to get more creative in their differentiators. What continues to make Starbucks one of the most fascinating brands is their dedication to unrelenting uniformity in their delivery of customer experiences. Granted, no brand is perfect and 100% all the time, but they have to be pretty darn close to it. The incredible thing about them is that they are reliably mindful of their own brand promise and it all starts internally, with their employees, their culture, and their processes. This internal 'due diligence' gets expertly expressed through touch, sound, smell, and taste...not to mention sight—direct eye contact and a smile.

I am not, however, going to make this article about Starbucks. They are simply a very accessible example and well-known enough to make my point. There are a select few other brands that get it too. Zappos.com, Ben & Jerry's, and Singapore Airlines, to name those few better known brands, and one not so well known, NuStar, an amazing energy company I recently researched. They profess their employees are their #1 asset and treat them like stars (and have an incredible employee manual to prove it – www.nustarenergy.com). And I must say, thanks to the new TV program 'Undercover Boss' – this concept is finally getting the airtime it deserves. Maybe over the next few years we will be able to tout more than just a dozen or so examples of highly conscious, customer-centric brands that sustain themselves through any economic environment.

This article is really meant to unveil some other than obvious ideas when it comes to creating true, memorable differentiation within your competitive landscape. So let's get started.

- 1) **Differentiation by Association:** Every business brand has an opportunity to take advantage of this often overlooked differentiator. Differentiating through associating your brand with something larger than the obvious product or service directly connected to you is potent. Today, our humanistic tendencies to feed our ego (even at

the very basic level) seek confirmation in many forms. We want to feel needed, we want to contribute to a cause, be a part of a solution, a team or a movement.

So the question becomes, how does, or how can my business brand associate itself with a greater cause? Your answer comes from knowing what your brand truly stands for. Identifying your core values will help you match the 'associative relationship' with a congruent cause or movement. Here are a few examples:

OPRAH doesn't just use her platform to expose and discuss interesting topics, she truly values education. **Cause = Oprah's Angel Network**, launching in 1997, viewers have donated more than \$70 million dollars to the *Angel Network* to build schools, donate school uniforms, and buy text books among other needed learning supplies.

DOVE brand, doesn't just sell the 'beauty bar,' they value the beauty within each of their customers. **Cause = The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty** is a worldwide marketing campaign launched in 2004 that includes advertisements, video, workshops, sleepover events and even the publication of a book and the production of a play. The principle behind the campaign is to celebrate the natural physical variation embodied by all women and inspire them to have the confidence to be comfortable with themselves. As part of this campaign, in 2006, Dove started the Dove Self-Esteem Fund that claims to change the Western concept of beauty from ultra-thin models with perfect features to making every girl (and woman) feel positive about her looks, no matter what they are. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dove_Campaign_for_Real_Beauty

Ben & Jerry's use ice cream creatively to express their core values around giving back to society. **Cause = The Ben & Jerry's Foundation**. The Mission of the Foundation is to make the world a better place by empowering Ben & Jerry's employees to use available resources to support and encourage organizations that are working towards eliminating the underlying causes of environmental and social problems.

Those who apply for grants must have projects that will:

- Lead to societal, institutional and/or environmental change;
- Address the root causes of social or environmental problems; and
- Lead to new ways of thinking and acting.

Source: <http://www.benjerry.com/company/foundation/who/>

Their ice cream products are merely a very creative vehicle to contribute and deliver results for what they are really passionate about!

- 2) **Differentiation by Experience:** This differentiator is greatly under-used and has so much potential for so many brands. Consumer research continues to show us that human beings are more drawn to buying an experience and that price is only one factor. Duane Knapp, author of *The BrandMindset®* states that "*Consumers pay in three important*

ways: time, money and feelings.” Price alone does not drive your customer’s behavior but rather the consistency in how your brand delivers **value** [through the experience].

For starters, all brands have to do is look at enhancing the customer experience through one or more of the six human senses.

1. How can you add **smell** to your brand experience?
2. How can you stimulate **visual** consistency in your brand’s experience with your customer?
3. How can you create a more multi-sensory experience leveraging two or more of the human senses?

Next time you walk into a **Victoria’s Secret** retail store count the ways they consciously leverage and manage their customer’s experience. From sight, sound, smell, and touch it is all strategically planned to manipulate the sensory impact the customer has with the brand.

Then, there are Stouffer’s frozen dinners. How do they create an experience for their customers? In their advertising they tout how their prepared frozen meals help bring the family together around the table. And they take it one step further, by leveraging stories, ideas, statistics that back up their philosophy (e.g., studies show that teens who have family dinner 5 times a week are 45% less likely to drink and 66% less likely to do drugs) around the importance of the family dinner at their dynamic website: LetsFixDinner.com

They’ve even set up a Let’s Fix Dinner™ Challenge where participants can set dinner goals and track their progress for some cool prizes. And Stouffer’s is pleased to be the title sponsor of CASA’s annual Family Day – A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children™ - a national movement to engage parents and educate them about the benefits of frequent family dinners. This year, **Family Day** is September 27, 2010.

Source: <http://www.letsfixdinner.com/Fact.aspx#>

For strictly service providers, think about all your customer touch-points. How can you leverage one or more of the senses to create a greater bond with your customers through your website, personal interaction, invoicing, follow-up, etc.? Research from Martin Lindstrom, author of Brand Sense, shows the more senses you activate, the stronger the bond you create with your customers.

- 3) **Differentiation by Innovation:** We’ve come a long way baby! Brands that have not yet considered the vast applications of new technology, social media, video, and their own website presence are missing the boat. Can you think of one industry that can’t begin to utilize innovation in their strategy to differentiate? But the real trick for business is

getting crystal clear on who they are and what they promise and make a commitment to live that promise throughout every facet of their organization – that is when the brand-relevant ideas begin to flow.

Here are just a few examples:

- a. **Hallmark®** greeting cards – **Brand Platform; “Caring Shared”** – so what better way to share sentiments in this day and age than to embrace technology that incorporates digital pre recorded sound files into their printed cards. But they didn’t stop there; they realized it is even more powerful and relevant to their brand’s purpose to allow the customer to record their own personal voice greeting! After that, they continued to embrace technology and innovation by creating a whole line of multi-sensory digital-delivery cards online. Staying true to what their brand stands for coupled with being open-minded and creative with technology results in a powerful bonding with an ever-evolving customer base.
- b. **Progressive Insurance. Brand commitment: Fast. Fair. Better.** Staying true to that statement led them to be innovative by studying the behaviors and desires of its clients resulting in the ‘Name Your Price’ option that taps into relieving the fears of overpriced, canned, non-customizable insurance packages and ‘Be the Boss of Savings.’
- c. **Delta Faucets** realized their customers often come to the sink with sticky, muddy, or otherwise dirty hands that if they used them to turn the handle, the handle would get dirty. So, they innovated a faucet that, with a touch of an elbow or upper arm, the water would begin to flow = Touch 2O® Technology.

When is the last time you surveyed your clients, secret shopped your own business, or observed how your customers use or don’t use your product or service? These types of actions can provide ‘aha breakthroughs’ for leveraging your next differentiator!

It is important to note that these differentiators will be most effective if they reflect your brand’s core values and committed promise. Creating a differentiator for the sake of differentiation will be short-lived and thus create distrust among not only your customers, but your employees as well. Take some time to think through the key attributes of your brand’s DNA and then match those attributes with one of the differentiator topics outlined above (there are many more where these came from)! Sometimes it takes getting back to basics before you can take the next step towards evolution.

About the Author:

Suzanne Tulien is Principal and co-Founder of The Brand Ascension Group, a multi-faceted consulting and training firm specializing in building brand perception from the inside out. BA Group partners with organizations to assist them in get laser-focused on defining their brand DNA and achieving sustainable brand success from the INSIDE OUT. They do this by guiding them to define, create, and build powerful brand experiences that engage, captivate and inspire customers, employees and all stakeholders. She is author of *The 6 Myths of Small Business Branding*, and co-author of *Brand DNA*. She is also on the Expert Panel of YoungEntrepreneur.com.



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For more information contact:

The Brand Ascension Group

Website: www.BrandAscension.com , Email: suzanne@BrandAscension.com, Phone: 1.719.265.1707

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