

## IT'S 2010 – WHERE IS YOUR BRAND GOING?

### *5 Strategies to Prepare Your Brand for Sustainable Success*

By Suzanne Tulien, Principal & Co-Founder

I am watching a great show on CNBC called 'Keeping America Great' featuring two prestigious American icons, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, while a host facilitates a town hall-style meeting with students from Columbia University asking them thought-provoking questions. One of the questions from a third year student was directed at Mr. Gates and asked something like this "Considering your level of success, what do you attribute to just sheer luck?" Bill Gates answered by stating that there were many incidences he attributed to his luck and success but the first two was being born in America and being born at this particular time in the world's evolution.

After that, an insightful discussion began about the importance for business leaders to understand the **context** of the **overall environment** (economy, perceptions, technology, and trends to name a few) and having sound principles to see you and your stakeholders through the **evolution of growth and innovation**. Mr. Gates reminded the audience how exciting the times are right now in terms of innovation, evolution and transformation. Never before have we had such a level of speed, mass communication, transportation, mobility, convenience, research and technology at our fingertips to further our own evolution.

It was this CNBC special that stirred my thoughts about writing this article. The show truly begs the question, 'do you know where your brand is going?' And secondly, 'how will you and your stakeholders prepare to get there?' It's 2010, wow, just sounds like a sci-fi movie doesn't it? Well, it's here, so now we get to embrace and leverage it...or not, it still is a choice.

At The Brand Ascension Group, we choose to embrace and leverage it! And we hope you do to. So we offer five strategies to prepare your brand for sustainable elevation. These are key areas we recommend you take inventory and consider serious action. By no means are these strategies the **ONLY** strategies to mull over, but we believe they will jump start you to in take full advantage of the context of your environment and drive the direction your brand is going.

**Strategy #1 – Get clear on the capacity and impact technology is and will be having in your industry.**

Everything is changing. Whether it is how you build your product, buy parts, sell parts, invent, service customers, deal with vendors, or promote your business – it is changing, either incrementally or in very obvious, abrupt ways.

Start studying these changes and begin to forecast how they will affect your processes, your customers, your employees and your bottom-line. Form a task team that can analyze this information and begin planning scenarios for success.

- How will your brand communicate value to your customer base? Consider the social media tidal wave and how you can maximize this technology.
- Will your brand create more differentiation with new technology? If so, when, how and where?
- Where can you find technology-based partner alliances that can assist your brand in getting better, stronger, faster? For example, teaming up with ‘host-beneficiary’ or affiliate online retailers to also sell your products to like customer profiles.

### **Strategy #2 – Assess how your brand’s human capital can be leveraged to innovate.**

Highly successful brands believe their people are their greatest assets. Do you have the right people in place? Not just from a skill level, but from a mental and emotional level? Are they engaged? Are they strategic in their thinking? Do they understand and embody your brand in everything they do? Are they a team player? Do they represent the future of your brand?

Gaining competitive advantage in your market space is not just about technology or a great product. It is perceptually weighted from the experience your customers have with your employees. Do you have employees who are ‘holding back’ the success of the organization? Do you have employees that are not reaching their full potential? These are questions to consider when evaluating your brand’s human capital and its ability to fuel your business’ growth objectives.

How can you begin the process of ‘full-on’ employee engagement with your brand? Moving your business into its next level of success cannot be done by a sole driver of the business (you). Consider the potential growth thrust when all stakeholders are behind you, understand your brand’s core values, differentiators and style, and truly live your brand at every customer touch-point.

### **Strategy #3 – Commit to walk your brand’s marketing talk.**

In our current and ever evolving global communication environment brands have to be more and more conscious of the dialogue that is occurring both on an internal and external level. Social media commentary, online reviews, ratings, chat rooms, etc. have created an instantaneous environment of available information about brands and customer experiences.

Have you been lured into a store or restaurant because of a compelling marketing message, coupon or promise and then sorely disappointed because your expectations were not even close to being fulfilled. Do you go back? Of course not, because there are 50 other choices less than a mile away. But I bet you tell a friend or two, or three (or Twitter) about your disappointing experience.

Now more than ever, your customers are increasingly educated, savvy, and highly particular with how, when, and where they spend their dollars. As an emerging, growing brand, you must take the time to assess your external marketing messages and ensure they are **congruent** with the actions and behaviors of your brand (e.g., your employees, your products and services). With the level of global competition brands have to start looking more internally at their own processes, their culture and their leadership to make certain they're walking their brand's marketing talk, better yet, exceeding the customer's expectations.

When you think about the statistic, *"94% of your customers WANT to be loyal"* (Zamba Solutions), it makes you think about all the ways you may not be leveraging this...If you could retain 94% of your customers, that's significant competitive advantage as it demonstrates you are walking your marketing talk.

#### **Strategy #4 – Declare a powerful, authentic Brand Promise and action it.**

This strategy is powerful in that it commits everyone within your organization to get highly focused on a particular 'way of being'. The promise declaration is a great exercise for your brand to identify and articulate, in a very brief and concise way, what your brand stands for and how it delivers. Then, once the promise is defined and composed – it has to be lived! This carefully crafted declaration is not just words on paper. It has to be able to transfer into specific behaviors and actions from within your business and expressed not only through all customer touch-points, but within the culture of your organization.

Your brand promise should be:

- 1) Enduring, remaining relevant for many years to come.
- 2) Intrinsically important to the stakeholders of the brand and the market you deliver to.
- 3) Unique in that you are exclusively positioned to deliver on it 100% of the time.

Your brand promise is a strategic tool used to ensure congruent and consistent behaviors, create new processes that support it, and to hold all stakeholders accountable to a unique 'way of being' for your brand. It answers key business questions, guides and informs strategic planning, shapes communication strategies, reduces arguments, and provides a clear directional path for the future of your brand. The promise should be tied to the rest of your brand's unique DNA attributes such as your core values, authentic differentiators and your own personality or style. It also shows up in the delivery of your brand's standards of performance – guiding your every move to stay on target.

#### **Strategy #5 – Assess where your brand can give back and take action in doing so.**

Highly successful brands see the value in giving back to their local, national and global communities and environments. What particular values does your brand have that lend itself to a particular cause? Think about Ben & Jerry's<sup>®</sup> – it's not really about ice cream – it's about supporting a variety of causes. The Ben & Jerry's Foundation, established in 1985, is entirely run by employees for the sake of dedicating resources to improve and support environmental and social issues.

More often than not, consumers want to belong to something bigger than the product or service they are buying. They want to feel a broader sense of 'ownership' of the brands they are loyal to. Even companies like Harley-Davidson<sup>®</sup> dedicate time and resources to give back. For over 27 years, they have chosen to focus on and support the Muscular Dystrophy Association; raising over \$65 million to aid in research and program services for children with MD.

Another well known brand, Starbucks<sup>®</sup>, has built an amazing Shared Planet<sup>™</sup> program that includes such feats as ethical resourcing, community involvement, and environmental stewardship, as well as promoting volunteerism. Review these brands' websites to get ideas on how your brand can begin actioning the process of giving back. Your customers will love you for it!

**Our bottom line point** is to turn inward, assess who you really are as a brand, dig deep and uncover your genetic code to competitive advantage – your Brand DNA. Allow you and your employee teams to get creative, have some fun and action it! There is so much more to business than just the almighty dollar, and with as much time and effort most entrepreneurs are putting into their business, why not make it all it can be. Walk your brand talk. Start seeing your business as a holistic part of the way the world functions and integrate more of your brand into every aspect of your being. Then you'll know where your brand is going in 2010 and beyond!



*Suzanne Tulien is Principal and Co-Founder of the Brand Ascension Group, LLC. She is brand consultant, award-winning graphic designer, a certified trainer and certified in Accelerated Learning Methodologies. She is co-pioneer of the Brand DNA methodology and author of The 6 Myths of Small Business Branding, and co-author of Brand DNA: Uncover Your Unique Genetic Code for Competitive Advantage. She regularly writes articles on branding for businesses and entrepreneurs and has been published on BrandChannel.com, eHotelier.com. [www.BrandAscension.com](http://www.BrandAscension.com), 719.265.1707.*