

# How To Build A Brand That Sells

## Putting Brand To Work For B2B

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The issue of brand building perplexes many a chief marketing officer and consumes board meetings as executives compete for scarce investment dollars. The value of a brand in consumer sales is well established. But in selling to other businesses, the purpose of a brand remains a question in many minds. “Just get out and sell more,” is a common refrain of many CEOs and board members when confronted with the effort and expense of building a brand. As a result, many companies repeatedly sideline brand concerns and continue to trudge uphill, simply trying to sell the next client or project.

*The question is whether you will control market perception or just let it happen.*

What so many don't realize is that everyone in the company is already involved in brand building whether they know it or not. Every communication, every interaction with the marketplace contributes to the overall perception and understanding of who you are as a company. The real question is whether you will consciously and deliberately control these perceptions or just let them happen. And the risk of just letting them happen isn't so much that the market will develop its own impressions of you whether you like it or not, it's that you'll be missing out on highly competitive opportunities to make your brand a direct and powerful force for sales and business growth.

Based on our experience helping numerous companies confront and overcome the brand challenge, we distilled a set of key principles and tools for building brands that sell. First, we identified the purpose of a brand from the buyer's perspective — a prerequisite before trying to market or sell something. Second, we identified a set of five “permissions” — five things buyers let companies with good brands do that they don't let companies with ill-defined brands do. And last, we developed a five-item “to-do list” — five things your company can do starting today to help build the right brand on a budget.

What do we mean by “a brand”? Let's start with what a brand is not. A brand is not your corporate name, logo, website, or brochure. These are elements of your corporate identity, and they are ways you can help build a brand, but they are not the brand. If you were to think of a brand on personal terms, your brand would be your self-image and character — how you see yourself and how you want to be seen by others. More important than your self-image alone, though, is how your image and character play out in relationships. Who you are as a friend, a spouse, or a confidant. Similarly, your brand plays an important role in corporate relationships: How customers see you as a provider, how suppliers see you as a customer, how employees see you as a place to work, and how investors see you as a steward of their wealth, and how prospects see you as a potential solution.

*A strong brand can reduce the impact of price on the purchasing decision.*

The difference between your character and self-image in personal relationships and your brand in corporate relationships comes from transferability. Brand, because of its profile and public standing, should be fungible and transferable — that is, people should have a sense of the company and what they can expect from it without having to get to know your company personally. Think of the public persona and reputation of a high profile individual. People have a sense (or at least think they do) of who a public person is, and what it might be like to know them on a more intimate level.

### **Brand: The Buyer's Perspective**

Brand, from the buyer's perspective, acts like an insurance policy. A brand on the side of a soda can says, “I'm going to taste the same every time.” In clothing, a brand on a tag says, “even if you don't have taste, you're still in fashion.”

In B2B sales, the buyer often doesn't know what he wants or what she's buying. As a result, a brand says, "Even if you don't know what you're buying, you can count on us to help you figure it out in a way that's going to benefit your company... and oh, by the way, we helped others and they kept their jobs — or got promoted." A B2B brand, from the buyer's perspective, insures the buyer against needing to know everything before they buy and it insures them against risks afterbuying.

### **Brand: The Seller's Perspective**

The basic purpose of a brand from the seller's perspective is to help educate the potential buyer and reduce the impact of price on the purchasing decision. Clearly Coca-Cola and Pepsi deliver the desired effect. Consumers regularly pay more for a Coke than for Shasta Cola. But will a CEO really pay more for a service because it comes from a well-known company? Clearly the answer is yes. The largest consulting firms — Accenture, IBM, PwC, EDS — even in these difficult times extract greater margins than lesser known competitors.

Doubters of brand value will argue the real reason behind the greater margin is better quality of service, or reduced risk based on track record. No doubt, these come into play. At the same time, alumni from these companies will attest that the differences are not as great as might be imagined. The bigger difference occurs at the margin — and in terms of "permission".

### **The Five Permissions**

Clients regularly give well-branded firms more permission — greater allowances, more opportunities — than their lesser-known competitors. Clients let these firms have:

**1. Access.** Any one who's ever tried to get into to see a C-Suite executive knows half the challenge is simply getting in the door... and anyone who's ever bought complex services or technology knows half the challenge is letting the right people in the door. Executives set up rules — some written, some unwritten — their staffs use to filter in and filter out people vying for attention.

*One rule schedulers use is, "Do I know these people and how they will be help my boss?" And one way they assess that is, "Have I ever heard of this company." The difference between those that get access, and those that don't is a strong and appropriate brand. We've actually seen administrative assistants and scheduling secretaries sit up straighter in their chairs when talking to Mary from AK-SEN-CHUR then when talking to Susan from Some Unbranded Company.*

**2. Latitude.** Many companies are no better than their last project. Clients place more trust in well-branded firms and let them extend themselves beyond their own stated capabilities. Clients let these firms take on projects of greater size, which may be due to their greater scale, but they also place a greater

level of trust in these firms. Trust, an intangible quality, is directly related to the level of brand permission these firms enjoy. Lesser-known firms are often limited to their existing qualifications. If the company hasn't done the precise project for a precise peer-client, the company is not given permission to take on the challenge.

*A leading insurance company recently put out an RFP with very exacting specifications for a new IT system. They received over 25 responses that met the criteria and filled out the response correctly, and 1 response that did none of that. The one non-compliant response came from IBM. When the insurance company made its down-select to 4 companies, guess who made the list: I-B-M.*

**3. Recovery.** The willingness to let a company "experiment" on the client's dollar is very low, especially today. Clients want to pay for tried and true experience. Nevertheless, even when working with a large firm with the precise experience the client seeks, mistakes do happen, and failures do occur. The difference between when a lesser known company stumbles and when a well branded company fails comes in the permission to recover. Well-branded companies are given greater permission to restore confidence, lesser-known firms might not be given this chance.

*Several years ago, a leading international bank purchased one of the leading trading and settlements systems. They also retained the services of one of the world's largest IT consulting firms to test and certify the product. Both failed miserably and repeatedly. The product arrived as untested "alpha" code and well below standard. The consulting firm fielded an untrained, inexperienced team that started behind schedule and stayed there. Nevertheless, the bank let the software firm take its time to fix the software on the bank's dollar, and the consulting firm to train a bunch of college graduates on how to test software.*

**4. Scale.** This is very tricky. Many people will hue and cry that the permission to scale (and the permission to set standards, see below) is more a factor of size and track record, than brand. Well, yes, that's true. But go back and read our original disclaimer: this article is for good companies, capable of selling and executing. We're not advocating brand-vooodoo or some kind of hypnotism that tricks clients into doing things they don't want to do. What we are saying, though, is that at the margin, the decision comes down to trust and perception. These qualities are built into a smart brand — or more importantly great brands know how, when, and to whom to emphasize scale and size to build to trust. It's that extra amount of trust that a branded company has that gives them the permission to take on a bigger projects than competitors — even in some cases where they don't have the track record to back it up.

*We watched SAP and Oracle swim circles around entrenched, well-qualified companies in market, after market. When Oracle made the decision to enter the public sector financial system market, lesser known, but more qualified firms with years of experience providing services and technology had to fight for their lives. Sure, Oracle didn't roll over them in every case, but Oracle certainly won a lot more projects than they warranted based on their non-existent track record in that market.*

**5. Set standards.** Often, companies will invest in emerging technologies and new services simply because they come from someone they believe will eventually set a standard.

*VHS and Betamax are two often cited consumer examples. Beta was the better technology, but VHS won out because it came from manufacturers capable of setting a standard.*

*A leading professional services firm recently put out a major RFP to replace its aging LotusNotes-based infrastructure. The original founders of Lotus have come out themselves and said Notes is a dying technology and companies should no longer continue to invest in it. The firm's RFP outlined very exacting specifications of what they hoped to accomplish. Several large technology firms responded with very compelling proposals. One responded with a proposal that failed to meet many of the basic tests and overlooked many aspects of the RFP. That company was Microsoft — and Microsoft is still in the running. While this deal is still in play and we can't predict the outcome, we believe a large reason Microsoft is still in the game is because the professional services firm believes Microsoft may be able to set a standard that will replace Notes.*

#### **To-Do List for Building a B2B Brand**

Well that's all well and good for companies that had decades and sometimes centuries to build a brand. And it might actually work for some companies with multi-millions to invest in global reach campaigns, but what can my company do about it? How do I get started?

Here are a few stepping stones to consider:

**1. Be deliberate.** Have a plan. That may sound simple, but it's really not. It requires you to think long, hard, and smart about what you want your brand to be when it grows up. It requires introspection, objectivity, time, and most of all, vision. You may or may not want to hire an outside professional to help you craft this vision, but the important thing is that you dedicate the time to develop one. Even if the plan isn't perfect, it needs to contain some fundamental building blocks:

**a)** A summary statement expressing the essence of the brand, and hence the company. Everyone calls this something different. We call it a Central Theme. It should not exceed 5 sentences and can be accompanied by a few "supporting themes." These short sentences should encapsulate the key points that add up to the overall value of the brand to your current and potential clients.

**b)** An assessment of how the brand is viewed today. An objective analysis of how customers, investors, analysts, and other key stakeholders view the company (and the brand).

**c)** A concept of how you want the brand to be viewed in the future. What do you want people to think of the brand 3-5 years from now? Think back to the five permissions. Which of these is most important to you? How can you build a brand that will give the greatest level of permission you seek?

**d)** A plan to bridge the gap. The key actions you need to take to change the perception — or shore up the perception — of the brand.

**2. Be iterative.** Implement over time. Starting with the few steps you identified in the plan, tackle them over time so your company can begin building the brand. Look not just for the quick fixes or the low hanging fruit — small things make a huge difference. The three most important things you can do are to:

**a)** Take action! Once you've planned out the next 6-12 months, start making things happen.

**b)** Keep moving. Consistency is key, and keeping up the momentum.

**c)** Share your thinking with your employees. They can be tremendous missionaries for the company. It can increase their understanding of the company and its directions, not to mention — be a great way to boost morale!

**3. Be consistent.** So tomorrow you have to go to a sales meeting. What are you going to say? Go back to the concepts in the plan. The central and supporting themes. Those better be in your notes, on the tip of your tongue, and in any written materials. They'd also better re-appear in your proposal, on your website, and in press releases. These may change and evolve over time, but when they do, those changes and evolutions should follow along the lines of the steps you outlined in the plan. Iterations, yes. Deviations or inconsistencies, no.

**4. Think about sales last... and first.** Sell the brand, not the next project or next task. Many executives say, "We don't have time to build the brand right now! Just go beat on the sales team some more to find more sales and more revenue!" Sales and revenue are certainly paramount priorities. In B2B brand building in particular, sales are very important. Many times a sale is the first time a brand impression begins to form. In the sales call, in the proposal, and in the award... that's when clients get their first lasting sense of the company. This is why you need an active plan in place: you truly have one chance to make a great first impression. That's why you should' think about sales last, and first. Get your sales team to worry about the brand while getting ready for the sales call. Think about what they're going to say, what they're going to write, where they are going to meet, what they're going to do, and how it will impact the impression in the client's mind. Then worry about how to close this particular sale. By selling the brand, you'll create a self re-enforcing cycle. The brand will sell for you, and each sale will re-enforce the brand.

**5. If you hate risk, start early.** Similar to compound interest, the earlier you start the more your investment pays off — even when starting with a limited sum of money. Particularly if you have a small budget, the small investments you make now, will pay big dividends down the line. The

important thing is to consistently make the investment — just like contributions to your 401(k). To suddenly go from having made no investment, to saying “I want the perfect brand tomorrow,” is the same as saying, “I’ve made no investment for the last 20 years, but I want to retire in 1 year.” Starting late, you’ll find yourself with little lee-way. Either the market will have defined your brand for you (which may or may not be to your liking) or you’ll be faced with making large pay outs to effect any real change.

If you start early though — when your company is just forming or as you begin to make that next big market move, you’ll have the chance to make the fundamental decisions that will impact the brand and the company for years to come. If you start early, you’ll be able to make the incremental investments and adjustments that will ensure your brand lives up to expectations, as opposed to trying to spend your way out of a brand you didn’t make.

### **Conclusions**

So building a brand that sells means creating a self re-enforcing loop in which you define your brand incrementally through each sale, and each sale in turn strengthens your brand. By being deliberate and iterative you can make the kinds of incremental improvements in your brand that set you up to be on the receiving end of the five permissions. By following the to-do list we outlined above, you can begin building a lasting brand that will sell.

## **About the Author**

*Richard Crespin is one of the founders and managing directors of The Delve Group, Inc. Throughout his career, Mr. Crespin has gained extensive experience assisting clients to improve the way they interact with customers and the market as a whole to increase profitability, customer loyalty, sales, and operations. Founding Delve caps an over 13-year career consulting to organizations in the public and private sectors. Delve dedicates itself to working with clients to build their organizations to last, around strong brands, taken to market across all customer touch points. Immediately prior to founding Delve, Mr. Crespin served as a Senior Principal at American Management Systems where he headed the company's Customer Relationship Management Practice. Mr. Crespin is an alumnus of both the George Washington University and the Harvard Business School. At Harvard he graduated from the School's prestigious General Managers Program. At George Washington, he graduated from the Elliott School of International Affairs with a degree in International Affairs. He has completed post-graduate work at the Elliott School focused on international economics and global security policy. Mr. Crespin is also an active member of the community serving on the executive committees of several associations and philanthropic organizations.*

## **About The Delve Group, Inc.**

*The Delve Group specializes in positioning and perception for business-to-business companies. Using its industry expertise and strategic creativity, Delve creates positioning and perception for its branding, marketing, & communications clients. With comprehensive competitive and market intelligence services, Delve measures and analyzes how effectively companies achieve their desired positioning and perception among target audiences. The combined value ensures Delve's clients accelerate growth, strengthen brand awareness, and create lasting advantage.*

*Headquartered in New York City, Delve operates throughout the United States and in the European Union. Learn more at [www.delvegroup.com](http://www.delvegroup.com)*