

# Is yours a 'flagging' brand?

**Ian Buckingham**, BringYourself2Work, and **John Roberts**, boom, assert that brand flag-waving can never really be enough

**I**N THIS ARTICLE, we challenge the notion that an appearance in Times Square or Piccadilly Circus is a true measure of success and suggest that a blinkered obsession with the material manifestations of the brand is actually a mark of a flawed brand strategy.

There's another way.

We all love good design, applaud great advertising and are wooed by catchy strap-lines or timeless logos. It's a fact, however, that organisations generally spend a disproportionately higher amount on the physical manifestations of the brand than they do on ensuring that all stakeholder groups are engaged with the brand, particularly employee groups. This spells trouble.

Brands have been eloquently described as 'the central organising principle for successful companies'. That's a snappy sound-bite, but more importantly it's a fundamentally simple and basic belief – that a truly successful brand must be an integral part of the fabric, the culture and the organisational make-up of a company. The logo on the letterhead is a necessary rallying point, but, as history teaches us, a flag standing alone on a battlefield can herald a defeat as well as a victory.

## Mixed signals?

Flags have been, and still are, used as a language in their own right – to signal strength or distress, give instructions or demonstrate intent. The problem a company can face is that its signalling, while attractively designed, may not always be properly understood by the intended audience. A company's signal must be articulated clearly in a way that is universally comprehended by external and internal stakeholders, or it simply becomes a memorable diversion, an entertainment and, in the worst cases, a costly fad.

Perhaps one of the most significant examples of mixed signals in our time is the well-publicised 1990s British Airways design venture. Consider its departure from the very British livery and the switch to the beautifully designed, well-



Times Square: the be-all and end-all of brand success?

intended, international airplane tailfins of 1997. The new tailfins proudly displayed cross-cultural artworks from the four corners of the world. This groundbreaking design change was supposed to signal global capability and the confidence of 'the world's favourite airline', but it became synonymous with form over content. BA was criticised for implementing a design policy that had lost sight of the essence of the brand and appeared to have misrepresented the strong emotions invested in what was,

and to a debatable extent still is, in effect, a national institution. BA and its advisers had seemingly underestimated the power of the Britishness of BA and experienced a very high-profile backlash. 'We fly the British flag, not these awful things,' said prime minister Margaret Thatcher, and the designs suffered the ignominy of her handkerchief personally draped over the models on display. From then on BA might as well have raised a white flag of surrender in the face of the cynical media feeding frenzy.

**Ian Buckingham** was the founding MD of Interbrand Inside prior to setting up BringYourself2Work ([www.by2w.co.uk](http://www.by2w.co.uk)), which specialises in developing people engagement and change management strategies.

**John Roberts**, a former executive with Saatchi & Saatchi, created boom ([www.boom.me.uk](http://www.boom.me.uk)) a brand catalyst for business leaders who need clarity, purpose and to be thrilled by their brands.



**British Airways: losing brand identity**

It's taken nearly a decade for BA to phase out this programme and return its aircraft livery to a stylish, adventurous, even powerful, British flag, the rebrand still being a subject raised at your peril at HQ.

If organisations are to avoid this type of costly disconnect they need a clear and well-grounded brand strategy. By 'clear', we're not referring to the hot-housed construction of meaning by an army of creatives and marketers. We mean 'clear' in a brutally simplistic sense that cuts through all the cosmetic fluff, the homogenous corporate-non-speak of value, integrity and fanfare for the common man, and that connects with the authentic heart of the organisation's culture. 'Clear' in the sense that it relates to value and is derived from an authentic understanding of the essence of the brand.

### Clear differentiation

If we accept that a core deliverable of any brand should be to communicate how an individual organisation differentiates itself from its competitors, brands should be viewed as liberators of the free choice that results in increased demand for your service. Like it or not, brands also exist to fulfil higher needs, and good branding drives value through a true representation of the founding values of the organisation itself. The best brands position themselves as liberators of choice for customers, employees and other stakeholders in a way that charms their target audiences into demanding an association with them, rather than enforcing compliance through brainwashing, alignment or entrapment with false promises. In the

case of BA, customers and staff are still drawn to an almost institutionalised sense of propriety, professionalism and integrity that may have been clouded by the revolutionary tailfin designs, however beautiful.

Strategies for communicating brands need to address both the external-facing, or 'promise making', communities and the internal or 'promise keeping', communities. They need to accept that brands exist on a number of planes: the Spiritual-Rational, Aesthetic-Functional and Behavioural-Physical.

In charting where an organisation's brand sits relative to each of these poles a clear picture of that organisation's brandscape emerges, a position influenced by a host of factors but principally:

- ▶ business strategy (that is, the extent to which they are in an expansionist or cost-controlling phase)
- ▶ the power and vibrancy of their internal culture
- ▶ internal and external communications strategies
- ▶ the depth and strength of the consumer's relationship with the brand.

It's vital that prior to any major brand re-think or refreshment, organisations understand the 'brandscape' both internally and externally if they're to maximise returns and limit the cattle-branding approach of conscripted communications.

### Country branding

It's a well known fact that many corporate brands hold more value than the GDP of many countries. No surprise, then, that country branding is a growth industry

helping South Africa reinvent itself as the 'rainbow nation', for example, or former Soviet outposts regain their identity.

We're struck by how much the Brand India debate is currently circling around this 'brandscape' concept, as the finest academic and corporate brains in the country consider where brand-led national competitive advantage lies. To anyone present at a number of the debates about the metamorphosis the Indian national brand is undergoing, it is fascinating to see how the quest for the rational expression of Brand India is gradually and appropriately being sublimated by the spiritual core. Surely it's in the blend of the spiritual and rational that the Brand India USP lies, providing a key to where Indian corporate brand opportunity can be found. It may be an extremely odd comparison, but just look what a similar cocktail did for The Beatles at a time when they were looking to explore new markets of their own.

The dynamic tension between the polar extremes of the brandscape is clearly happening at the corporate level both in India and the UK. It's an interesting challenge that the internationally sleeping giants within the Tata Group, including, for example, Titan and the motor vehicle divisions, the retail brands, customer service organisations, airlines and technology companies, must address as they contemplate moving increasingly rapidly from the national brand battleground and into the international market.

Central to this challenge is the need to answer the key question: 'What is the appropriate brandscape for our organisation in order to deliver our business objectives?'

In short, to what extent do they need to morph their brands to appeal to international markets and to what extent is it their very 'difference' that gives them an authenticity, spirituality and sense of the exotic that is more attractive than it is alien to the potential target market? In order to answer the question, they must first understand the DNA of their brand ▶

as it is currently configured and how it fits within the brand pantheon of their country of origin. This is certainly an under-exploited USP in India, where the fates of the corporate brands and Brand India itself are inextricably linked. To do this they need genuine, spin-free dialogue with their customers, their people and other key stakeholders.

It's a dilemma that plenty of the most 'western' of brands face as well. Take, as an extreme example, the journey recently travelled by the wild-child brand MTV2.

### Re-thinking MTV2

MTV Networks is a fast-growing entertainment media conglomerate that is riding the digital wave to deliver more and more specialist music-based TV channels for ever more specialist, segmented audiences. But the problem facing MTV2 in the UK was that, in the battle for ratings and the quest to satisfy a fast-changing market it hadn't properly defined, it had lost sight of just what it was; what differentiated it for its core viewers – male teenagers with a taste for rock music. MTV2 was in danger of becoming the marshmallow channel where there was no clear definition and where viewers could not build a true relationship with their brand because they weren't really sure who or what it was. The brand was suffering an identity crisis by attempting to be too many things to too many people.

MTV2 was sending out very powerful but very mixed messages. Interestingly, on investigation, it was clear that this situation resonated within the company, where the internal MTV audience – including the production team, editors and marketers who make the channel – were also struggling for a defining and differentiating sense of identity. As this uncertainty extended through to the Viacom media team, which is there to promote the channel and sell airspace to suitable advertisers, there was a compelling commercial need to be very clear indeed.

By undertaking an intense but focused audit programme MTV started on the journey to define the MTV2 brand by answering the following key questions:

- ▶ What does the brand promise its viewer?
- ▶ How does that differentiate it, both from its competitors in kind (the other MTV channels) and Sky network's newly

created music offering, including Scuzz?

▶ How does it position itself relative to its competitors in mind – those other brands that were staking a claim for a share of the viewers' hearts and heads, such as Diesel, Wicked and Pot Noodle?

▶ What role can the brand have in shaping, nurturing and extolling the internal culture?

Over several months, a rigorous audit looked at existing desk research and data to gain an understanding of the channels' many positives. Allied to this were brand-storm sessions with the internal audiences: half-day workshops that were part structured process, part energetic brainstorming created to harness the power, the passion and the knowledge of the movers and shakers within MTV2 and help clarify just where in the portfolio this channel sat, and what made it different. Key to the success of these was the use of independent facilitators to create a safe place for a comprehensive and personal critique.

The result of this exhausting process was a clearly defined brand, clearly epitomised by a powerful, authentic and resonant positioning statement: 'Music with balls by bands with attitude.'

An appropriately simple positioning that by its very composition defines not only the remit of the brand, but also the tone of voice and the personality shared by the viewer. It won't appeal to everyone – but that's exactly the point. With one bold statement MTV was able to mobilise its people with a rallying cry that signalled the behaviours and values the new channel represented. It also raised a clear flag to attract the appropriate customer base.

This positioning statement became the unifying force for all stakeholders along the customer supply chain – be they the editorial playlist or the designers of the on-air identity. It has since been accentuated by appropriate supporting physical design. In this case design is an instrument of change, not just a symbol of it. MTV2 finally developed a brand and wasn't just 'doing branding'.

The principles we extol here are true, we believe, for brands across categories, sectors and markets. Our point of view has been shaped by the rich diversity we've encountered. The lessons hold true, whether that's helping Camel clarify just what it promises and what it means to be the fifth largest cigarette brand in a world

that's fast banning all forms of tobacco marketing; or helping the staff of one the world's largest financial services companies re-connect with their brand in the context of the objectives of the business and the part they can play in delivering those objectives.

### To summarise

▶ Brands must be integral to the whole commercial entity – helping to shape and be shaped by the internal culture as well as the outward-facing identity, and becoming synonymous with the broad ambitions of the business.

▶ Competitive advantage lies in taking a balanced approach to brand development and by developing a brand strategy that has both physical and behavioural dimensions.

▶ The heritage of a brand needs to be understood and honoured in order to bring about authentic engagement with current and future stakeholders, be they customers or indeed employees.

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▶ Effective brands use design and brand identity as more than just a clear signal of intent; it can be an instrument of change, not just a symbol of it.

▶ Great brands are often linked to great places to work, if the brand custodians are attentive to the promise-making internal community as well as the promise-taking external consumer.

Think about these points next time you consider your brand strategy. Remember that waving a flag is a pointless or even damaging exercise if the recipients of your message are receiving mixed signals. ■

lan@by2w.co.uk  
johnr@boom.me.uk