



Understanding Brand Perception

Understanding branding means you must first understand that brands really exist in the mind, in spite of the fact that we tend to think they exist on the shelf. The mind of your consumer is where you want to neatly place your brand. And perception is what gives it meaning.

Many years ago, Rolling Stone magazine launched its now classic “Perception vs. Reality” campaign aimed at media professionals. In this series of ads, Rolling Stone took head-on the common misperception that the magazine was only read by hippies and deadbeats. Next to the picture of a flower child in the ad was a picture of the Rolling Stone “reality”: the young professional reader. Rolling Stone probably realized that many media strategists and buyers weren’t considering buying the publication for their clients because they perceived one thing, but in reality, the magazine was another. The result was a very creative, compelling and breakthrough campaign with a very simple message: If you want to reach upwardly mobile, successful young adults, place your advertising in Rolling Stone.

Sometimes perceptions need changing (as in the Rolling Stone example) and sometimes they are reinforced at every opportunity through consistent marketing.

Here are some examples:

- Christian fast food: Chick-fil-a
- Safe transportation: Subaru
- Adult playground: Las Vegas
- Family entertainment: Disney
- Your “other place”: Starbucks
- Home “perfecting”: Home Depot
- No-frills air travel: Southwest
- Department store service: Nordstrom
- Just do it (with this): Nike
- Cool technology: Apple

Accurate and desired brand perception is closely linked to the “why” of the brand and is cemented, over time, through consistent, focused marketing. Inaccurate and undesired brand perception can be the result of poor or neglected marketing, attacks by a competitor (as in the case of negative political advertising or comparison ads) or misfortune from outside the control of marketing, such as an outbreak of food poisoning for a restaurant chain or cruise line, or a scandal, such as a result of misbehavior of the brand’s founder or spokesperson.

As a marketer, you must ask how your brand is perceived and is that perception the reality you are striving for in your business. And if it isn’t, what are you doing to correct that misperception?

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