



BY ANDY SEE
MARKETING

BUILDING BRAND STRENGTH - WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF STAKEHOLDERS

MARKETING communications and advertising have always been core parts of brand building. However, today's hyper-informed audiences are so deluged with messages on a daily basis that they automatically tune out most of them.

Anything that feels remotely less-than-interesting or relevant just flies by unnoticed. Unfortunately, that includes most advertising, marketing and even PR messages.

These days, there is little difference in terms of Unique Selling Points between most products or services to capture audience interest. Moreover, the internet has made the marketplace extremely transparent as consumers today can view price, performance and quality levels of products and services from anywhere in the world.

As such, the days when companies could compete by hard-selling products or services are long gone. Undoubtedly, there are some companies that still do it, especially low-price commoditised goods and services.

Whilst we can continue to pour in millions to market our products the traditional way, we must have really deep pockets to invest in multiple media platforms to capture the attention of today's consumers.

This is obviously difficult to sustain

for most companies as the global marketplace today has shrunk, literally into the palm of our hands.

BEYOND SELLING: WORKING ON THE BRAND MUSCLES

So how can companies get their brand messages noticed in today's cluttered and noisy marketplace?

In order to be "fit" enough to compete in the highly-challenging digital marketplace, brands need to go beyond selling product benefits. Brands need to step-up the game, integrating brand, business, corporate responsibility and sustainability to develop a larger narrative - the brand's "why".

To truly win the hearts and minds of stakeholders, the brand needs to walk the talk and embody its values in action. To build trust and loyalty among the communities they operate in, brands have to play an active role in contributing positively to what the community care about.

"Brand experiences" must also be holistic, exciting and most importantly authentic to capture the hearts and minds of stakeholders.

In other words, our brand stories must be worth telling for our customers, employees, communities and even our governments. And it needs to be communicated well through all media



channels be it owned, earned, shared and even paid.

Is all this really necessary?

To use a gym analogy, for a brand to be truly fit today, mere "branding exercises" alone are not going to cut it anymore. Brands need to build up their "metabolism" so to speak - through strength training. Brands need to build "muscles" and strength through a compelling brand story that is relatable to stakeholders.

NOT HARD-SELLING MAKES BUSINESS SENSE

Today, companies around the world are successfully building a corporate culture of social responsibility. The aim is simple - to win consumer trust, goodwill and loyalty in order to preserve business sustainability.

Major brands are turning to such consumer engagement strategies because they realise this is the most dependable way to sustain their margin in the long run.

There are many examples of how such



One of the most beloved is perhaps “Tan Hong Ming In Love”, a super sweet Merdeka campaign by the late Yasmin Ahmad that picked up multiple industry awards.

ENGAGEMENTS, NOT EYEBALLS

Why is winning hearts and minds so important to brand building today? It’s partly because the way audiences consume information has changed. With the barrage of messages coming at audiences on a minute-to-minute basis, the name of the game today is no longer “eyeballs” but “engagement”.

Amidst a noisy marketplace, we need to invest in building a larger narrative for our organisations and brands to meaningfully engage with audiences. To sustain that engagement, brand communications have to be meaningful and relevant to them.

Such communication strategies can indeed transform the brands of even the dullest product categories and commodities. Dove, LEGO and PETRONAS are classic examples of effective brand narratives driving business success.

socially-conscious holistic campaigns have helped grow a brand’s market share.

Take Dove’s long-running “Real Beauty” campaign. First launched in 2004, the worldwide social change campaign aims to inspire women to have confidence in their natural beauty.

Dove successfully created a sense of trust with consumers by speaking to deep-seated emotions that many women feel about themselves.

The campaign included advertisements, social media videos, media engagement, grassroots workshops, on-ground events and even the production of a book and a play.

Another good example is LEGO, one of the world’s most recognisable brands. Like many great brands, the LEGO Group was on the brink of bankruptcy in 2004 as market dynamics and consumer preference change.

Obviously, the Company had to change its strategy and narrative. It repositioned itself and built a larger narrative that strongly positions it as



a partner for “inventing the future of play”.

LEGO focused on driving conversations of innovation, imagination and learning, and even announced last year that it would be producing blocks made from plant materials in 2019 as part of its commitment to sustainability.

On the home front, our very own PETRONAS, the only Malaysian Fortune 500 company, is another obvious example. The PETRONAS brand in Malaysia is perhaps most associated with their festive season advertisements.

As such, when people think of Dove, LEGO and PETRONAS, chances are they don’t primarily think of soap, toys and petrol but of the images and feelings those brands evoke – such as confidence, innovation, imagination or a sense of national pride.

This is the fundamental role and the true value of holistic strategic communications campaigns which encompass PR, marketing communications, stakeholder engagement and even advertising.

Today, our role as communication professionals and brand custodians is to develop communication strategies

and campaigns that win the hearts and minds of stakeholders.

WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE IN ALL OF THIS?

Does this indirect approach to brand messaging benefit the bottom line? Short answer: Yes. A Nielsen study revealed that almost half of consumers prefer to spend money on socially responsible brands, even if they have to pay more.

A well-strategised and executed campaign that truly reflects the brand's story creates tremendous brand value as well.

According to Samir Dixit, managing director of Brand Finance Asia Pacific, a brand's value is measured by many factors including the competitiveness of the brand, the revenues and profits margins it makes, the stickiness it has with the customers, and its relative strength against other brands.

When Dove's first series of Real Beauty messages was launched in 2004, it received significant public interest and media coverage. The publicity that it is getting over the years is probably worth billions of dollars. Today, Dove is one of the world's top beauty brands with an estimated brand value of US\$4.1 billion.

Meanwhile, LEGO is now a US\$5.5 billion company, selling over 70 billion bricks every year across 130 countries and is growing its markets around the world including China.

The Company emphasised that its success is about getting closer to its customers around the world by creating fun experiences through its innovation. LEGO's conventions, which started with only 60 people in 2000 has grown to become an event attended by thousands of fans around the world.

PETRONAS also promotes its brand through social action and involvement in socio-economic development projects.

Their poignant and often thought-provoking ads have often driven grassroots conversations about national unity, family values and what it means to be Malaysian while its active support for socio-economic development projects including those in the East Coast Economic Region and the country's oil and gas sector makes the Company a

Winning the Hearts and Minds (WHAM): How to make it work

1. Define your brand values.
Which values can our company commit to? What can we authentically champion? These are important questions to consider if we want to build an authentic, trustworthy brand in our stakeholders' minds.

2. Do good sincerely
Once we have determined our brand values, look for ways that we can manifest it authentically in the real world. This could come in the form of thought leadership platforms, sponsorships, collaborations, long-term programmes or one-off events.

3. Talk about it
Identify the channels where you can let our stakeholders know about what our brand stands for and what we are doing. Be careful though, there is a fine line between sincere enthusiasm and bragging.

4. Involve your stakeholders
Remember that communication works two ways too. Use channels where we can get to know our audience and they can get to know us. Providing opportunities for people to get involved in the brand's social initiative can also have a positive impact.

5. Provide thought leadership
This doesn't happen overnight. We need to develop a lot of good content to accumulate enough credibility and followers to establish ourselves as a thought leader. But when it is done right, it generates a tremendous amount of trust and goodwill amongst our stakeholders.

6. Empower Internal Champions
Enthusiastic employees are our best brand ambassadors! So involve them in the conversation about our brand's vision and let them help make it a reality. This lets them know that they are valued and they will feel more motivated to do their best work and advocate for the company or brand.

national icon.

In addition, PETRONAS has been at the forefront of many thought leadership platforms in the areas of technology, health, safety and environment particularly in the oil and gas sector. Other outreach programmes include motorsports sponsorships, which places the PETRONAS logo across the globe.

It also carefully ties this in with its business – promoting it as having the end-to-end solutions for fuel technology. As a result, PETRONAS is Malaysia's top brand, with a brand value of US\$13.3 billion as at 2019 and loved by Malaysians from all walks of life.

DOING REALLY WELL BY REALLY DOING GOOD

Of course, a brand's reputation is only as good as what exists in the public mind. As such, companies cannot deploy PR campaigns without fully embracing what their brands stand for. Maintaining brand reputation requires consistent and committed efforts as audiences expect brands to practise what they preach.

Authenticity and transparency are key in today's digital world. Remember, mobile phones have made citizen activism very easy.

Companies or organisations which are not true to their brand values are at risk of being quickly found out and widely exposed on social media. If that happens, the brand will need some serious damage control to survive.

This soft-sell approach requires long-term investment in carefully crafted communications.

The winning hearts and minds approach may not yield immediate results, but when done right it has the power to shape how people experience our brand. This in turn will empower people to willingly support the brand because they love what it stands for, what it does, and the stories the brand wants to share. **mb**

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