

## **Are you a brand champion?**

By Ramanujam Sridhar

Let's play a quick game. Give me the name of a Cola? A watch? A computer? A scooter? A pair of athletic shoes? I suspect that your answers might well have been Coke, Titan, IBM, Bajaj and Nike. At least mine were. All of these brands are top of mind. They are visible. They are heavily promoted. They are (with the possible exception of IBM) consumer brands. And yet, there are corporate brands, service brands and techno brands, which we keep coming into contact with. These brands may not have the advantage of 60-second TV commercials, extensive merchandising and eye-catching glow signs to keep reiterating and reinforcing their presence to the target audience. So they need innovative and different ways of remaining in the target audience's mind and that's no small challenge.

### **Branding, as we first knew it.**

As anybody in Madras (as it was then) will tell you we all grew up on Horlicks. That was our nourishing beverage until we graduated to South Indian "Kaapi." This had other implications too. On the few days that I was helping out in the kitchen or when I was fetching something from my mother's kingdom, I was confronted by rows and rows of Horlicks bottles collected assiduously over the years.

"Where's the sugar?" I'd yell.

"The third Horlicks bottle from the left," would be the answer.

"Where's the salt?"

"The first Horlicks bottle in the bottom row."

And the guidance would continue.

Yes, consumer brands have multiple ways of remaining in our vision and in our memory. Not so for corporate or service brands. The challenge as Mike Clasper, president of Procter & Gamble states is intriguing. "Brands", he says, "will need to win the battle for share of mind, not share of shelf."

### **Brand Ambassadors v. Brand Champions**

Consumer brands rely on brand ambassadors. Parker has Amitabh, Omega has Cindy Crawford, Taj Mahal tea has Zakir Hussain, Santro has Shah Rukh and even *The Economist* had Kissinger. Of course, one is completely bewildered by the number of brands for which Sachin is the brand ambassador, but then, that's another story. The common thread in all this is that communication is from the outside. And it is driven by mass media communication. The reality, however, is that these brand ambassadors may have very little to do with the company or its values. They are used because marketers believe there is a strong fit between the brand ambassador's personality and the consumer's aspiration. Whilst one recognizes the need for brand ambassadors for some brands, it is perhaps important to recognize what every corporate brand needs. Every

corporate brand needs champions. And these champions are within the company. They are its employees. They impact, mold and convey the brand values to various target publics. Our employees are going to determine our brand's success or failure.

Let me explain this with an interesting analogy. All of us are familiar with Harley Davidson. We dreamed about it and yearned to ride it. And yet, there's an important fact about Harley. Harley is a brand that created itself as much as was created by its very owners. So Harley's image is determined as much as anything else by the people who buy it and the people you see riding it. If the riders were truly staid and dowdy, it would certainly impact our perception of Harley. Similarly, our perceptions of companies are largely guided by the people who work for it. Are they professional, competent and committed or apathetic, rude and ignorant? Are they champions of your brand or destroyers of its equity?

### **Enter the HR manager**

Some of my most formative, satisfying and challenging years were in Mudra in the late 80s and early 90s. The organisation was humming with activity and energy. The agency had "buzz." It was a bit like standing at short leg when Bishen Singh Bedi was bowling. You could "hear" the spin even if you weren't watching the seam. Mudra had an important system/person in place. A live wire HR manager who was a sounding board, counselor, trainer and salesman all rolled into one. He had an infectious enthusiasm and a passion for the company. He was a true brand champion who shared the success stories of the agency with whomever he came into contact with. A tremendous role model for the young people who would be future leaders of the company.

"Part of the requirement for a brand is passion," said Graham Mackay, group managing director of South African Breweries. And this is what is lacking in most organizations.

Chief executives, often enough, are passionate about their brands. But what about everyone else? A leader today has to be less of General Patton and more of John Buchanan. He also has to be a cheerleader. We spend more than half of the day preparing for, going to, coming from and actually doing work. If that is challenging and stimulating, then we can certainly be passionate about our place of work and communicate this to the rest of the world. So today's organisations need human relations more than ever before. But its more than recruitment training and compensation. It is about creating an environment for viewing the company as a brand.

### **Brand types.**

Branding theory classifies employees into 4 types.

- Brand champions are storytellers who spread the brand idea.
- Brand agnostics are interested but not committed.
- Brand cynics are not involved with the brand idea.
- Brand saboteurs are working actively against the brand idea.

Clearly every organization needs brand champions. But the questions that are more difficult to answer are questions like these.

- How well is the company's mission and vision communicated internally?
- How well have employees bought into this?
- Are the employees empowered?

Ailsa Petchey, a flight attendant on Virgin Atlantic was organizing a wedding and understanding the travails of it. She felt it was easier to go to a one-stop shop that would organize everything. She took the idea to Branson and the result is Virgin Brides - a chain of shops that cater to everything the would-be bride needs. Gary Hamel, the renowned management guru asked, "Could this happen in your company? Could a twenty-something first-time employee button-hole the chairman and get permission to start a new business?" Not a hope in hell! So the question is "Are our employees empowered for them to be our champions?"

**Don't use the branding word, do the actions.**

Most of us tend to be convenient. We believe that the brand is the CEO's baby. Or it's the brand manager's. Or it's the human relations person's. The reality, however, is that it belongs to every one of the employees. It has to be communicated and even more difficult, though it may seem, has to be internalized.

As Rita Karakas, a consultant in organizational development said, "An organization has to come to terms with how it actually owns branding as an attitude, as a presence, as a state of mind, a politique de presence, where everyone is a communicator and everyone is an embodiment of the essence of the organization."

Every organization has a heart. The heart is not just on the outside. You need insiders to carry on feeding the heart.

Are your employees feeding or starving your brand?

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