BRAND WISDOM FROM GRACE SLICK

Recently, I Googled, “What is a brand.” I do this periodically to see what are the latest opinions about branding floating around the Internet. This answer popped up: “*A brand is an intangible marketing or business concept that helps people identify a company, product, or individual. People often confuse brands with things like logos, slogans, or other recognizable marks, which are marketing tools that help promote goods and services.”* As a side note you can thank the smart folks at Investopedia (www.investopedia.com) for that pithy definition.

While I don’t disagree with what is a pretty stock answer, I do think it misses the larger point about – and the value of – a true, or authentic, brand. Namely, that limiting branding to a set of visual and verbal characteristics overlooks the deeper reason that some brands are timeless and others fade into obscurity or disappear altogether.

And the reason why some brands endure? It’s *love*, plain and simple.

BRANDS ARE ALL ABOUT EMOTION.

When asked, psychiatrists will tell you that the strongest emotion is love. Think about it. What’s the dumbest thing you did in the name of love? How about the bravest? Love can leave you embarrassed or proud. Sometimes both, at the same time. More to the point, an abiding love can leave you fulfilled in ways nothing else can.

One of my all-time, top ten, songs is ***Somebody to Love***, by the Jefferson Airplane. Basically, the lyrics offer the remedy for life’s pain: *“When the truth is found to be lies, and all the joy within you dies….* At which point, Grace Slick belts out what could well have been the mantra for the late 1960’s, *“You gotta find somebody to love.”* After more than 50 years her message still makes me shiver.

The truth, then and now, is that finding somebody to love easier said than done. Looking for an emotional connection with someone to ease your pain and perhaps bring you some moments of joy is not only difficult, if done in haste, it can lead to some poor life decisions.

On the other hand, authentic love gives us a sense of joy, purpose, and self-worth, which leads to self-fulfillment. Of course, this can be addictive but it’s unlikely you’ll end up detoxing in the ER as a result.

A BRAND CAN BE SOME*THING* TO LOVE.

Fortunately for those folks who are, shall we say, relationship-challenged, the life-affirming power of love doesn’t have to come from another person. It can come from one’s association with a purpose, or a passion. It can also come from a product, or service, that gives that person’s life…meaning.

That being true, when considering the power of a brand to capture loyalty, I suggest that we could adapt Grace’s life coaching to, *“You gotta find some****THING*** *to love.*”

Interacting with a branded *product, service or enterprise - one* which helps you accomplish an important purpose, satisfies a deep-seated passion, or fills us with joy can give one’s life a richer sense of meaning, belonging, and status.

When introducing the concept of branding, I always encourage clients to begin with the brands they prefer, or better yet, the ones brag to their friends about. These are the sorts of brands that people display: on their clothing, in decals on car windows, on bumpers, or have tattooed on their bodies. These brands are significant to them, and they want­ *you* to know it. They include products companies, military branches, sports teams, musical groups, and religions.

THE STRONGEST BRANDS ARE THE ONES THAT RETURN YOUR LOVE.

Relationships can be fickle. Passions can wane. The strongest ones are reciprocal. They listen to you. There is a give and take, and a mutual respect. If a brand you love suddenly changes its original values, or purpose, if it seems to blow with the wind, as a longtime devotee you will feel abandoned or worse, resentful.

On the other hand, a brand that consistently commits part of its message and resources to a purpose or mission that is meaningful to you inspires a loyalty which renders competitive pricing nearly irrelevant, and is one that diehard fans will go to great lengths to seek out.

Responsive brands, those who authentically embrace a purpose as much as they do their product or profits, survive cultural upheaval, span generations and become generational icons. These brands are the polar opposite of trends and fads. Pick a product category and a brand that stands for something beyond making a superior product. A few examples come to mind: Patagonia, Ben & Jerry’s, and IKEA. By the way, these companies make boatloads of money in addition to doing good.

BRAND LOYALTY MUST BE HONORED.

Time passes. Consider brands like Nike, Coke and Disney who once inspired tattoos. While they have established category dominance, they no longer inspire individual passion beyond, perhaps, their shareholders.

For instance, Nike, once synonymous with personal achievement, its category dominance led to it becoming all things to all people. Though world-famous, Nike no longer inspires individual aspiration. How about Coke? Once synonymous with refreshment, it has become an international behemoth whose products are generally interchangeable with the nearest rival. Yes, these folks make boatloads of cash, but their brands are about products, not passion

Then there are the brands who – having become legends within their own walls - forgot who brought them to the dance in the first place. Recall the travails of Disney and Bud Lite when they chose to surf the latest cultural trends, and left their loyal fan base feeling confused and ignored. In other words, as brands they became unresponsive. And, consequently, have lost both revenue and market value.

The lesson? A successful brand inspires a passion in its customers that must be nurtured and respected. Like any relationship, it requires genuine sensitivity and regular attention to keep its customers loyal and happy.