



Banking image and reputation attributes -

Why should I 'like' my bank?

In business there are always winners and losers and the role of a brand consultant is to help their clients ensure they can successfully achieve an effectively differentiated offer, image and reputation to attract and retain their target customers. But those consumers, empowered by the Internet are targeting who they want to deal with enabled by the web to instantly identify, compare and acquire products and services 24/7. This has totally disrupted the way companies must now operate.

Banks are in the front line like retailers, selling services rather than tangible products but having to provide experiences that must appeal to the customer and meet a wide range of changing needs and expectations. What people say about you is the key to success or otherwise.

The Millennial generation are now seen as the most influential factor when defining appropriate branding and marketing strategies. But meeting the needs of tech savvy individuals, who are easily bored, questioning corporate values, open to sharing and creating communities of like-minded interests is a tough challenge for an industry still coming to terms with the fact they have customers not just simply accounts.

Nobody likes banks especially since the financial crisis and on-going arguments about top banker's bonuses because, like lawyers and dentists, they are seen by many as more of a distress purchase, at best a necessary evil. Starting from that reality it is perhaps not surprising that in

many cases banks are desperately trying not to be banks. A review of new bank branch concepts worldwide reflects an incredible range of approaches - from airport and hotel lounges and receptions to boutiques, spas, night clubs, cafes, conservatories and community centres.

This identity crisis of some banks in trying to be what they are not, runs the danger of being counter productive in terms of regaining trust.

When it comes to developing new brand identities and marketing campaigns the same attempts to re-profile and reposition can be fraught with issues of credibility. Banks with basically the same offers, trying to tap into new consumer mindsets, are often trying to desperately move away from any reference to their previous bank profile or ownership.

Renaming is an obvious strategy to signal and reflect a new banking proposition. With names like Friend, Simple, Go, Grow, or my favourite Frank, the name is a key message and marketing platform.

That is fine for a new online mobile start up but not so easy for a traditional bank with the baggage of their past and an expensive branch network to re-profile to meet the new image, managed by staff maybe still operating with the old mindset.

Nobody likes banks especially since the financial crisis and ongoing arguments about top banker's bonuses...



Brand definitions are now all about how you are perceived based on user experiences – ‘what your customers say it is’ ...‘brands are created in the mind’... ‘the sum of all the conversations about the brand’, etc

The key is to do what you say you do or at least be seen to be trying. The old Avis car rental slogan ‘We try harder’ is a great role model in being realistic and not over claiming to be perfect.

Sadly some banks are still promising but not delivering. It still amazes me that big impersonal corporations still try to appear as soft and cuddly imbued with family values. Patronising advertising strategies still prevail in the sector presumably because focus groups have told the management they need to be more ‘human’.

A favourite customer quote for me was a comment on ANZ, an Australian bank’s advertising strapline ‘We live in your world’ – ‘if banks live in my world I’m moving to Mars’. Another comment on the same bank was about how they spent 15 million dollars ‘to change their logos for three stripes to one with a blue flower’ – a warning to anyone involved in rebranding to always explain what the change represents and why it signals potential benefits for the target audiences in terms of improved service, attitudes, etc.

So how do you communicate with your audiences? What is the right medium, message and tone of voice? Social media is seen as a game changer for retailers but not for banks. A survey by

‘The Financial Brand’, an online sector magazine, not unsurprisingly noted, that only 5 percentage of consumers see social media as an appropriate channel for financial conversations. The danger is that social media can make or break hard won reputations and need to be treated with great care and sensitivity, traits not commonly shown by large corporate institutions like banks.

When we developed the brand for Russia’s first mobile bank, Ocean, in 2007, we carefully avoided any association with formal banking. The aim was to make any screen visit a pleasant experience with reminders of the pleasant things in life using ocean imagery. The fact that 7 years later the brand has kept this simple but effective approach is an example of adapting to a changing market but maintaining a distinctive identity.

Metro Bank in the UK, in trying to be more a retailer than a traditional bank, has some excellent consumer centric attributes preferring to hire staff from the leisure and service sectors rather than banking. But their slogan ‘Love your bank at last’ is still an optimistic claim. Some banks get this with totally straight messages like the American mobile operation Go Bank’s ‘Its about time’.

Or one of Frank’s lines that aim to connect with their cool Singaporean 17-25 year olds target consumers – ‘I need to be free, I need to me, I need to be Frank’. Moven’s ‘spend, save and live smarter’ is certainly to the point communicating this American mobile bank’s offer.

*an Australian bank’s
advertising strapline
‘We live in your world’
- brought a customer’s
comment:
‘If banks live in my
world I am moving
to Mars’*



In the UK, TSB, having been split off from the parent Lloyds Bank, is deliberately talking about its local credentials in a direct response to the big banks international practices. Emphasising their loyalty as 'local customer first' rather than to international shareholders has a lot of resonance with a public questioning why dividend payment appears to be as a first priority of the major banks like Barclays.

When Barclays previously led their marketing campaigns extolling the fact they were the biggest (and presumably the best) they were seriously out of step with the mood of the customer and now they are attempting to be more humble and caring. They announced this year their 'brand transformation' initiative where the CEO came up with five new values for the company. These are frankly generic basics for any business such as 'we act with integrity in everything we do'. Clearly an admission to their more dubious previous behaviour. Unfortunately at the same time they announced they were axing up to 12,000 jobs to 'streamline' their operations. An interesting move given one of the five values was that 'our colleagues are carefully engaged' - clearly only the ones that are left !

It shows the apparent disconnect between the organisation, their people, their customers and society.

People just want to be able to trust a bank, to make their life easier and provide accessible support and advice. Convenience, service, quality and value are the basics for any business offer. The challenge is then achieving the emotional

connections that then differentiate one bank from another. For some it seems the bank wants to be their 'friend' and be 'liked'. Very American personal language and messages of banks like Friend, an Alabama bank, aim to stir the emotions with the line 'Banking is a business of friendships' with a philosophy noting that 'we will always, always be true'. This would appear to work for their customers although maybe not appropriate to a more cynical English mindset. In the UK, the Nat West Bank is more 'British' in modestly claiming to represent 'Helpful Banking' featuring their staff and emphasis on personal service.

HSBC's previous strapline 'The world's local bank' was a simple but highly effective slogan in terms of combining their international and local attributes. The long running advertising campaign reflecting cultural differences was simple but intriguing.

The chief executive's decision to drop the message has left them with no clear memorable association and advertising that simply shows images of world trends and statistics. Inevitably you have to question what was the expected response? - presumably not, 'So what?' and more importantly, 'What has that to do with me or the Bank?', 'What's the benefit for me?' Apparently it is all about creating a customer dialogue but who wants to talk? The basic test of any advertising is to be clear on the desired reaction' i.e. 'What is your point and why is this good news for me?' 'You' is the key factor, the need to appeal directly to the individual.

'Banking is a business of friendships' ?

People just want to be able to trust a bank to make their life easier and provide accessible support and advice.



Engaging the hearts and minds of management and staff is now an understood corporate priority and yet 'walking the talk' is still rarely practised.

Taking an ethical stance provides the Canadian bank, VanCity a very distinctive branding and communication style directly reflecting their values summed up in their slogan 'Be good with money'. But then you have to live up to this ethos and the Cooperative Bank in the UK now has a credibility problem given its message 'Good with money' sounding particularly ironic when the unethical behaviour of management was exposed together with the discovery of a big hole in their accounts. So much for aligning with noble themes like 'tackling global poverty' and 'protecting the environment'.

Engaging hearts and minds is the basis of marketing and branding.

Emotional triggers and rational advantages have to be defined and communicated and then aligned across every potential touch point and interaction with the company as a cohesive consistent experience. This is the challenge of so-called CEM strategies - Customer Experience Management. But 'Managing' can imply manipulating. The advertising industry has to somehow grab their audiences attention cutting through the natural screening out we all have to employ if we are not to be overwhelmed with the 3000 plus messages we are told we can receive everyday. This increasing resentment of intrusive advertising presents banks with more challenges in how to promote their brand and offer.

Banksy, the graffiti street artist, has some telling quotes on advertisers that brands should remember

'They butt into your life....They have access to the most sophisticated technology and they bully you with it....They have re-arranged the world to put themselves in front of you...' Tough words but marketers must understand 'engaging' must not be simply a euphemism for overt selling.

Today, the potential key differentiation between similar service offers is the people and culture of the company. It is vital to make the most of human touch points and interactions given the increasing reliance on anonymous high tech processes. Engaging the hearts and minds of managements and staff is now an understood corporate priority and yet 'walking the talk' is still rarely practised. Workplaces are a direct reflection on a company's internal brand culture and another 'brand experience' that can engage and inspire employees and create a sense of pride in the organisation. Matching the back of house experience for all staff with the desired external image of the bank should be a key priority in leveraging a bank's human capital to best advantage.

The lesson is that if your own people really like you then your customers may have some real reasons to be followers and become your best ambassadors.

'Liking' your bank may happen yet!

Clive Woodger

Chairman SCG London