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Determining Your Brand Quotient

We all know how important branding can be. A quick scan of the past weekend's new movie box-office receipts finds the internationally-recognized "Simpsons" brand in fine fettle, raking in nearly \$72 million (and umpteen puns of the "That's a lotta d'oh!" variety), while "I Know Who Killed Me," starring the rather tainted brand Lindsay Lohan, grossed a little under a buck seventy-five and a couple of stale Skittles. (Plans for a sequel, "I Know Who Killed My Career," are currently on hold.)

Most companies' brands fall somewhere in the middle of that range, with many hoping to increase brand-awareness and impact but unsure of how to do it. Enter Sandra Sellani, VP of marketing at commercial real estate brokerage Sperry Van Ness International, with her book "What's Your BQ: Learn How 35 Companies Add Customers, Subtract Competitors, and Multiply Profits with Brand Quotient" (WBusiness Books).

"You can't change your IQ, but you can change your BQ," Sellani affirmed to me last week. She took the VRIO structure (introduced by Ohio State University's Dr. Jay Barney, a four-question framework used to determine an object's competitive potential via examining its Value, Rarity, Imitability, and Organization) and applied it to branding.

The result is a 40-question test "designed to locate your strengths and weaknesses," she said. "Once you've seen what those are, it should be easier for you to build a brand." The questions divide into four categories – Brand Strategy, Brand Alignment, Brand Communications, and Brand Execution – which then can be plotted on a grid to give the user his business' BQ.

"A lot of people don't think about branding when they're starting a business," she noted. Even for those who do, "The whole concept of branding has evolved over the years. It's no longer just about coming up with a logo or a tagline. It's become so much more a part of a company's overall strategy."

You can develop the greatest product since time began, she maintains, but if you don't follow up with a strong branding regime, a competitor/imitator may ultimately steal your thunder. She points to the example of the Hydrox cookie,

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Determining Your Brand Quotient

by Kevin Zimmerman

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which predated the Oreo by four years but has since gone the way of the dodo.

“Oreo branded it and took [the concept] to such a level of success that most people thought Hydrox was the imitator,” Sellani says. “If you fail to tell your message to people, you can easily be knocked from your #1 position.”

Not that one necessarily needs to be a Nabisco, overwhelming Sunshine Biscuits and its bygone Hydrox with a branding campaign that’s probably totaled in the trillions over the years. “It can be done on a shoestring,” she said. “The important thing is to come up with a message, remain consistent, and get the word out effectively.”

First and foremost, a company’s leader must be the brand’s champion. “For a long time it was thought of as something for the marketing department,” she said, “which is true, but the company’s leader must reinforce that message and make decisions based around the brand. Otherwise the company could be in a lot of trouble.”

Sellani also insists that a company’s branding and corporate strategies must be the same. “Find one focal point you can leverage throughout the company,” she said. “Volvo decided to brand itself with safety, so their strategy became The Safe Car. Safety for them is not just a brand, but a strategy as well.”

Sellani asserts that the BQ can even be tailored to individuals: “It all revolves around, ‘What do I have that’s of value and makes me difficult to imitate?’” She recalls one colleague who took the BQ test for himself, then went on several job interviews and asked each company what its brand was; four different ones couldn’t articulate it. “It made him wonder if he should work for that company.”

Whether you’re selling cookies, “The Simpsons,” or yourself, picking up “What’s Your BQ” seems like a solid idea. Maybe even our pal Lindsay can bring her BQ back up to an acceptable level ...

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