



Peter Finch has worked as Strategic Director for leading international advertising groups including Ayer Inc, Dentsu, FCB, and Saatchi & Saatchi where he was responsible for the success of major national and international brands in a variety of business sectors including corporate technology, FMCG, automotive and B2B. During this time he lived and worked in London, New York, Madrid, Barcelona and Frankfurt, taking responsibility for global brand and communications planning. Peter was also responsible for introducing training programmes for agency people at every level from Graduate Intake to Senior Management and Client Mentoring.

White paper

Is Building a Successful Brand Just a Matter of Sex?

Peter Finch of What Next? Consulting explores why technology companies often fail to develop successful brands and finds that a predominantly male business culture is one of the main factors in limiting their growth. He identifies five principles that any manager can use to help build a powerful brand and add more value to their business.

Moving from 'push' to 'pull' is a magic moment. It's that realisation during a sales call, that the prospect has heard of your company, respects your reputation and is already interested in what you have to offer. It makes all the difference to your growth, your profitability and your personal motivation. It's the result of having a brand reputation that precedes your sales efforts; and it's all too rare amongst technology companies.

Technology businesses are shaping our world and are run by some of the smartest people on the planet, so why is it that they so often fail to develop powerful added value brands and are stuck on a relentless treadmill of 'hard-push' selling?

This article explores some of the reasons why bright managers get it wrong...the history, the harsh truths and some surprising observations. Along the way there are proven principles that you can use right now to start getting the 'brand thing' right.

It started with the geeks...

There wouldn't be an IT industry if it weren't for the geeks. From online shopping to the iPod, our lives have



Moving from 'push' to 'pull' is a magic moment. It's that realisation during a sales call, that the prospect has heard of your company, respects your reputation...



been transformed by people with the vision (and obsession) to find answers to questions we didn't even know we had. But the success of the geeks has left the industry with a culture that often works against building successful brands.

Most geeks are men (with some notable and highly successful exceptions) and a traditional male approach to business doesn't work when trying to create a great brand. These are some of the reasons why the very strengths of the industry can be a dangerous weakness and how (male or female) you can start to break out of the culture...

Dominated by reason

Brand-building is not irrational, but it depends upon a recognition that there is a strongly emotional element in why clients buy what they do. Of course, the first stage in buying any technological product or service is based upon hard fact, but at the all-important subsequent stages of differentiation and evaluation, emotional factors can make all the difference. Ever pitched for a project and been entirely

bewildered why you didn't get it? The chances are the prospect was influenced by a positive emotional pre-disposition towards your competitor that coloured their perception of the facts. Facts that should have won you the business.

So the first step in building your brand is to step outside the world of the entirely rational and start to consider what 'soft' or emotional issues might affect your customers.

In a large organization you might commission research to get a hard analysis of this soft data, but if you don't have these resources just talk to your existing clients and recent prospects. It's amazing how a simple conversation about their business challenges will reveal the emotional drivers behind important purchasing decisions.

The greatest brand-builders are the most attuned listeners...they can sense what is important to their customers and the values they are looking from their suppliers.

Principle 1

Identify the emotional as well as rational needs of your customers

Something to do today:

Call one of your customers and ask them what are the big issues in their business right now. Identify the emotional needs behind the business needs (e.g. security, trust, creativity etc) and consider how your company genuinely meets these demands.

Obsessed with product innovation: Innovation is at the very heart of the technology industry and no company can survive without a ceaseless drive to develop better products and services. But most organizations have found that devoting everything to the 'killer app' (or its equivalent) is not enough. As markets mature, it's how you deliver that's as important as what you deliver. It's not enough to claim that 'we try harder', clients want to know why they can trust you, exactly how you're better than your competitors.

The harsh fact is that many companies aren't much different from their rivals; they have devoted all their energy to innovation and there's nothing left when it comes to differentiating their service. Only as strong as their last success, these

companies are gradually sucked into a spiral of declining margins and cost-cutting as they fail to add long-term value to what they are selling. Recognizing this situation is easy, breaking out of the spiral is a whole lot harder.

A good start is to take a candid look at how your organisation actually behaves. What service principles does it believe in? How is it structured to deliver these principles? What are the incentives to sustaining a better and 'branded' service to your clients?

Principle 2

Make sure your service is as innovative as your products

Something to do today:

Write down three specific things that make your customer service different from your competitors. Consider how you can reinforce and build these differences through training, new working methods or incentives.

Impatient: Technology people want results now; it is an industry that is dominated by speed as well as innovation. Clients need it, competitive pressures demand it and the culture thrives on it. But brand-building is often about the future, putting in place a strategy that will support long-term growth and healthy margins. Add to that brand consultants who profit from elaborate development processes and it's no wonder the industry is fearful of committing to building brands.

However, the reality is that good brand strategy should deliver results immediately as well as in the longer-term. Get your brand positioning right and your very next sales call should be more memorable, relevant and persuasive. And defining your brand need not be a prolonged process. If you can read the market, understand your

customers and know what you're good at, you should be able to define your brand positioning in hours rather than months.

Creating a successful brand is not complicated or unduly costly, it is just a matter of priority. Commit to brand-building and you will make it happen; too many managers complain about the fact that they have a non-existent profile, but fail to ever do anything about it. Just start now...even the smallest step can be the start of something big.

Principle 3

Make brand-building a priority

Something to do today:

Use your five minutes in the shower to work on your brand. Commit to doing at least one thing every day (no matter how small) to defining what makes your company different, and how you can communicate that to your colleagues and customers.

Ego-centric: Most technology companies are dominated by people who have dominant personalities – you have to have a high degree of confidence and courage to make a success in the industry. In some organizations the personality becomes the brand and it works well...at least at first. The charisma of the founder can unite teams and attract clients through a kind of corporate heroism that gives vision and purpose to the whole organisation. But companies grow and people change, and its hard to maintain that level of intuitive brand energy over the long-term.

The failure to turn personal vision into brand vision is the main reason that so many smaller technology companies fail to maintain their momentum and fulfill their early promise. It's crucial that corporate values come from the top, but that they are

instituted in brand-aligned attitudes and behaviours throughout the organisation.

Few customers have direct contact with the founder or senior management, it is the daily touch-points or 'moments of truth' with every member of staff where brands fail or come to life. Most senior managers tend to consider brand in terms of logos, marketing or corporate identity, but the thing that will make the biggest difference to your reputation is how your people think and act when doing their jobs. Brand is about purposeful action not about pretty design.

Principle 4

Your people are your brand

Something to do today:
Stop the next colleague you meet and ask them how they are practically delivering a branded service through what they are doing. If they're not confident they are doing this (or even unsure of the question), you're failing to make the most of your brand.

Increasingly specialist:
As technology progresses at an exponential rate it is inevitable that the industry is becoming increasingly fragmented (and it's a very male tendency to delight in ever greater levels of specialization). However, paradoxically the trend to tighter niches and more tailored offers can work against adding value to a brand. The more specialized the offer and the market, the harder it is to generate the broad level of awareness that generates a well-respected reputation. Being a famous fish in a small pond is fine as long as you never decide to expand your markets into other or bigger ponds. The lucrative niche market can soon end up being a commercial back-water for an ambitious organisation.



Being a famous fish in a small pond is fine as long as you never decide to expand your markets into other or bigger ponds...



Even more dangerously, the trend towards increasing specialization reinforces the tendency towards 'strategic introspection' that works against successful brand development. Great brands are based upon leaps of inspiration that connect an organisation with the largest possible potential market. For a brand to endure and grow it must catch the attention of an audience beyond its existing constituency – it must act as a driver of constant expansion – bringing in new customers from the fringes of its activities. As technology companies operate within increasingly specialist markets, it's critical that their brand strategy remains relevant to potential new business areas.

Principle 5

Build a brand with broad relevance

Something to do today:
Imagine that your existing main area of business was to dry up in the next six months – what new sectors could you move into – and would your brand still have relevance?

So whether you're male or female, recognising the characteristics of the dominant culture can help you stay ahead of your competitors in developing a powerful and higher profile brand. In an industry of impatient egomaniacs take time to consider what are the broader emotional factors in customer decision-making and how your organisation can meet these needs.

Testosterone is great for hunting prey, but it needs emotional intelligence to build successful bonds with prospects and clients. Creating a brand is rather like building a successful relationship – if you are from Mars, make sure you also have the perspective of someone from Venus.