

Brand-Image *Boffo*

BY BRITT DIONNE

LANDOR ASSOCIATES

Movie plots typically follow a standard arc-of-change: back-story, conflict, and dénouement. Most of the time we can guess where the hero will ultimately arrive. What we really want to know is how they'll succeed in getting there.

Do they recruit a plucky sidekick? Starve out the enemy or charge the castle gates? In other words: What are the success factors that lead the hero to a happy ending?

Managing a branding program can feel like a cinematic drama of sorts, complete with plot twists and a bevy of characters who each have their own agendas. A happy ending—in the form of a successful brand implementation—is certainly not a given.

In fact, many branding programs meet an untimely end because internal challenges, such as funding, skepticism, and resistance to change, are not addressed early in the process. To make matters worse, success factors like internal education and evangelism are too often assigned bit parts instead of starring roles.

Despite the potential hurdles, countless organizations do successfully manage a branding initiative through to full implementation. But a select few do it exceptionally—avoiding much of the clichéd drama along the way. Storage and data management company NetApp did just that in 2008, when it launched a comprehensive branding program intended to achieve broader and deeper awareness in the marketplace.

NetApp's success demonstrates that the branding programs most likely to reach a happy ending are those that both anticipate internal obstacles and identify success factors way before the opening title sequence starts to roll. That is why NetApp's story

is a “must-see” for any organization contemplating a branding initiative.

SCRIPTING THE NEW NETAPP BRAND

Founded in 1992, NetApp had already surmounted a major hurdle by 2005: breaking the \$1 billion revenue mark. But that accomplishment was just a prequel to the much bolder plans NetApp would undertake over the course of the next few years. By 2007, it was a \$3 billion company with plans to keep growing and claim the number two market share slot, behind industry giant EMC. To achieve those goals, NetApp needed to broaden its position

A behind-the-scenes look into the making of NetApp's global brand.

within the marketplace. Third-party qualitative and quantitative research indicated that the company's existing customers were loyal and passionate NetApp advocates. However, among the general marketplace there was a lack of awareness of the NetApp brand and the company's capabilities.

Co-founder Dave Hitz, who wrote a NetApp “Future History” paper to envision the company's next steps, recognized that growing its customer base would require more than just continued product innovation. In fact, he identified “a better understanding of NetApp today” as the goal second only to achieving the next revenue milestone.

Importantly, he also included “increased brand awareness” as one of five strategic themes designed to support continued company growth. To help

A Gateway to Opportunities

NetApp was ready to grow its market share and expand its presence globally from a niche storage player to a strategic IT partner.

Simultaneously, the company wanted to develop a brand platform that would help to better communicate its relevant differentiation within the market.

Moreover, the brand messages needed to speak to a critical new audience—strategic decision makers and influencers—while remaining relevant to the core technical audience. Having grown rapidly through both organic growth and acquisition, preserving the brand's existing core equities—superior technology innovation and a customer-centric, "get things done" culture—emerged as another critical brand challenge. NetApp aspired to be more, but wanted to remain true to the values that had initially made it successful.

Through qualitative research with current and prospective clients and partners, we were able to map the NetApp customer experience across various touchpoints to identify where the brand had the greatest opportunity to grow its business.

The key insight indicated that the brand needed to evolve in order to communicate the company's uncompromising commitment to quality, its high level of innovation, its tradition of collaboration, and its results-driven employee culture. This was a significant shift away from the existing brand communications approach, which—while successful—focused on product attributes.

As a result of the research, NetApp partnered with us on an extensive rebranding program aimed at elevating

the conversation from technology (simplifying data management) to business (achievement and unlimited opportunities).

We developed a comprehensive approach by (1) identifying the opportunity to target two critical audiences; (2) developing a new strategy demonstrated through verbal and visual expressions; and (3) creating an experience for customers that is integrated and multi-channel.

Over the course of a year, we developed an extensive visual and verbal brand that included a new identity, name, messaging, architecture, nomenclature, tone of voice, and tagline—Go further, faster.

The new "gateway" identity reflects NetApp's bold commitment to innovation and lets customers, partners, and employees see new possibilities for their futures. Capturing the essence of the Arc de Triomphe, the mark is a blue gateway signaling both NetApp's portal to new opportunities for customers and, when cropped, a platform to launch beyond barriers.

The supporting visual identity system includes design elements that emphasize the company's long tradition of enabling breakthroughs and creating outstanding customer experiences.

Informed by a new brand architecture and nomenclature, we established a brand voice and created comprehensive brand guidelines and training. Employees have already embraced the new NetApp brand, which is now poised to help the company nurture its existing relationships while forging important new strategies that can take the business to the next level.

evolve NetApp to a top player in the storage and data management category, the company committed to a major brand initiative, the likes of which it had never undertaken.

Tasked with leading the charge, NetApp's corporate marketing team identified key stakeholders with cross-functional expertise who could contribute to the development of the new brand strategy.

Top branding agency experts were retained. Internal teams were identified. Strategy was developed. New audiences were studied. Messages were retooled. A brand platform was created and translated into visual and verbal expressions of

NetApp. The brand launched internally on March 3 and externally at NetApp Analyst Day, March 11, 2008. A happy ending was had by all.

Simple, right? Wrong. The corporate marketing team worked diligently and deliberately over a 14-month period to gain support for the branding initiative and steer it through the organization. This was not an easy task given NetApp's engineering culture.

FOUR SUCCESS FACTORS

This critical process of securing internal buy-in is where many organizations struggle, often because

they simply did not anticipate and plan for it. Here's what NetApp did right and why its approach serves as a best-practice case for the internal management of a branding program.

1. Vision. Guided by Hitz's "Future History" paper, the corporate marketing team knew where NetApp needed to go and who it needed to beat to transcend its current position in the marketplace. That clarity of vision kept the brand strategy development process on track and facilitated decision-making. Moreover, the team was guided by an understanding that the branding initiative's success depended on their ability to communicate the link between NetApp's brand strategy and its growth objectives.

2. A strong team. Even before any internal conversations about the brand initiative took place, the corporate marketing team was given a challenge to build a robust marketing strategy. This changed the relationship between marketing and sales in significant and positive ways. Marketing took on a more proactive role that went beyond just providing the sales team with collateral—they were increasing the level of interest, delivering actual sales opportunities, and impacting pipeline within the field.

Empowered in this way, the corporate marketing team was poised to lead the brand initiative when the time was right. Additionally, once the branding program commenced, it was appropriately staffed by a brand task force of more than 25 key internal stakeholders. This inclusive, cross-functional group was involved early in the process and represented marketing, sales, business units, HR, IT, workplace resources, and more.

3. Patience and persistence. The team was wise to keep in mind that creating a brand is not like flipping a switch, in part because so many internal stakeholders are involved. The most critical stakeholder set is often senior leadership, which can make or break a branding program, so securing their support is essential to success. The team had to anticipate and proactively address a number of internal objections, from budget issues and attachment to the original Network Appliance brand, to skepticism around the value of brand building.

To overcome these potential obstacles, the team struck a shifting balance between patience and persistence. They approached the branding program as a (long) journey rather than a destination. They also thought in terms of how they could make it easy for the executive team to join the ride. One-on-one meetings and strategic alliance building secured brand buy-in well in advance of major decision points.

4. Education and communication. The single-most important factor in securing company buy-in for a branding program is often education. Fortunately, the corporate marketing team started by educating itself before approaching senior management. That meant commissioning third-party research and allowing the findings to guide the scope of the branding program.

The results indicated that NetApp had two immediate tasks: expand its target audience to now include strategic management as well as technical staff, and re-craft its verbal and visual expression so it could connect with both audiences. With these two goals identified, the corporate marketing team remained focused on the important first phase of the program: research and strategy development.

Conversations about the name and identity were not broached until later in the process. Rather, the corporate marketing team made it a priority to educate the executive team by sharing with them the brand awareness and customer experience insights.

Ultimately, those research findings played a significant role in catalyzing the executive team and helping them understand how branding could help transform the business. Through continuous training, communications and evangelism, the corporate marketing team got the company on board.

NetApp's branding initiative success story is not new, and neither are the internal obstacles that came with it. What makes the NetApp story compelling — what makes it a blockbuster hit instead of a B-movie — is the approach the corporate marketing team took to steer the branding program through the organization. They anticipated. They were deliberate. They were proactive.

And NetApp's happy ending did not actually end when the new brand was unveiled on Analyst Day. After all, tangible business results are the only good reason any organization would undertake a branding program — and that kind of ROI takes time to manifest itself. But the NetApp of today is far better equipped to raise its brand awareness and to achieve its revenue goals. Which is to say: Stay tuned for a killer sequel. ■



BRITT DIONNE is senior marketing communications manager in the San Francisco office of **Landor Associates**. Britt can be reached at 415-365-3830 or at britt.dionne@landor.com.