

Brands Be *Nimble*

We hear it every day: Everything is changing. Social media, globalization and climate change are just a few of the powerful—and complex—forces at work in our lives.

Not only are people more connected, with constant access to a world of opinion mixed with fact, but they're also feeling less confident, lacking control over everything from home to work to politics.

Nearly every business category is more crowded, too. The grocery aisle was once the most salient example of brand proliferation. Now consumer electronics, fashion, entertainment, travel, and even finance boast a dizzying array of product and service brands.

Principles and practices for better branding.

At the same time, brands have come to mean more to us, moving beyond one or two aspects of our lives to play larger roles. Just look at Apple. What was once a purveyor of beige-boxed computers is now the go-to source for mobile communication, music, and entertainment.

So, the world is complex and facing major challenges, competition is fierce, and brands mean more. So what?

The problem is that most enterprises are based on outdated business models: the Industrial Age cult of efficiency and the focus group-driven definition of consumer desire. Give them what they say they want, as fast as possible, with the minimum capital outlay required; disregard anything unproven, or requiring time to really do well; and pay no heed to hidden production costs—environmental, social or cultural.

This approach doesn't engender the kind of flexibility businesses need to adapt to today's world. Nor does it promote the expanded scope of multidimensional brands. But that's where brand innovation comes in.

For many years, innovation has come into play mainly in corporate R&D labs or product-design

consultancies. The focus has been on creating innovative products—new *things*. But adopting innovation principles at the brand level can create greater differentiation and relevance. Innovation is a way of working—it's a practice, not a product.

Innovation is a non-linear approach to solving problems or addressing challenges. That means it doesn't fit the standardized workflow built into most corporations. Instead, it relies on fluid movement among three areas of creative thinking: exploration, ideation, and realization.

In the exploration sphere, an interdisciplinary team endeavors to understand a given challenge in new ways, from diverse perspectives. This mode of consumer research relies more on empathy and intuition than on rigorous quantitative analysis. Traditional research methodology is helpful, but it's only one of the ways to explore a situation.

Consider the difference between taking a survey—where respondents tell you what they like or don't like and what they *think* they want—and observing people as they move through their daily lives. The first method allows very little opportunity for new, inspired ways of seeing the world. The second, when done with empathy and open eyes, can provide hundreds of potential insights.

In the ideation sphere, the team generates as many concepts as possible, with a focus on seemingly wild ideas. Through a mix of group-based (divergent) and independent (convergent) work sessions, participants play with the insights derived during exploration.

The best ideas are often those that seem the craziest at first, because they have the most breakthrough potential. For example, the name BlackBerry sounded strange and risky when it was proposed for a new mobile email device, but the naming team and the executives at RIM recognized that this would help it stand out in the technology category.

The third sphere, realization, is where the top ideas are refined, made tangible, then quickly tested for effectiveness. This phase can involve written stories, image-based “mood” boards, logo sketches, role-playing exercises, or any other means of bringing them to life. The goal is to try out the new brand ideas and determine areas for improvement.

This process already has a firm foothold in the world of product development, but our focus here is on brand innovation, which is aimed at enhancing, evolving, or reinventing audience perceptions. It is a way of looking at your communications, environments, employees, and the interrelationship of your products and services with new eyes, in order to improve business agility and increase brand value.

Moving from a linear, productivity-driven process to an organic, collaborative, and playful work style — across the enterprise — represents a dramatic shift. It's a critical shift, however, if your brand is to remain competitive.

How can a business become more agile? While the transition takes time and dedicated resources, the principles behind it are relatively simple:

1. **Empathy.** Empathizing with your audiences creates deeper connections and gives you a greater understanding of the people whose lives the brand seeks to enrich. This, in turn, provides more opportunity for new, insightful ways of serving them.
2. **Collaboration.** People with different roles, interests, and backgrounds bring diverse perspectives to bear. Setting up interdisciplinary teams helps generate a greater breadth of ideas and can allow you to build on those ideas in unexpected ways.
3. **Courage.** Fear of failure is the single biggest obstacle to bringing something new into the world. Creating an environment in which failure is encouraged — even rewarded — gets people to think outside their comfort zones, and conjure up wild ideas that just might turn out to be the next big thing.
4. **Intuition.** If it “just feels right,” it may well be. Discounting ideas that won't test well or don't conform to numeric data can result in breakthrough ideas being mothballed. Instead, allow these ideas to percolate, refining them and exploring ways to make them better.
5. **Tenacity.** Continuing to forge ahead in the face of adversity is critical to developing new ideas. Even when ideas don't pan out for a given problem, they should be catalogued and referred to when new challenges arise. What didn't work this time may be the perfect solution next time.
6. **Play.** The basic tenets of play — imagination, free-form thinking, role-playing — are important aspects of creative thinking, but the critical element is that of having fun. While the outcome of brand innovation has serious ramifications for a business, this is about the process, not the outcome.

Although brands are often thought of as the superficial “wrapper” of an offering, the reality is that perceptions can define the success or failure of a product, or even the organization as a whole.

At its best, brand innovation permeates the organization, providing an atmosphere in which everyone from accounting to customer service feels empowered to take risks and contribute to the brand's evolution.

A business that can integrate brand innovation across the enterprise will be well poised to attract and retain talent; create dynamic communications and new modes of expression; move quickly to where new consumers are, better addressing needs and desires they didn't even know they had; and serve a richer, more meaningful purpose.

We're not suggesting that businesses should expect to change overnight. The foundation for these innovation principles came out of the experimental R&D labs of Lockheed Martin, HP, Apple, and Xerox. They did things differently than headquarters, and that was the point. While the practice of innovation can seem chaotic and murky, it's fast becoming crucial to competitive success.

Consider ways you can make incremental changes to challenge the status quo and bring brand innovation to your organization. It's okay to start small. Carve out a think tank in an underutilized office. Pick a program and some talented employees and empower them to work with these principles as their guide. Bring in consultants to help navigate the change and create a roadmap for integrating brand innovation into your organization. Just do something.

Our world is diverse, complex, and highly symbiotic. The old way of working will continue to produce the same old results, which no business today can afford. We need to think, act, and generate ideas with the speed and agility of the change that surrounds us. ■



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