

## THE ESSENCE OF BRAND

Investing in a strong brand image can pay off down the road

By Maura Keller

In the brand management game, it's all about getting people to remember your business, your products and your brand. Branding is the arena that puts the "big picture" perspective into focus and determines where a company takes and makes its future. It's the philosophy and core behind all business development. With that said, more and more specialty coffee retailers are realizing the important role branding plays in making immediate and lasting impressions on consumers and on their bottom line.



### Defining your Brand

The easiest way to understand brand is to equate it to a company's reputation. More specifically, a brand is all the thoughts, feelings, associations and expectations that the customer experiences when exposed to a company's name, trademarks, products, buildings, signs, symbols and people.

Brands are far more than just a marketing concept or an asset on the company's financial statement. A brand—whether it is corporate or product brand—includes all visual and verbal elements that are combined to communicate the brand promise. Consistently and accurately executed, the brand's corporate or product

mark, collateral and advertising become an instant communicator of the essence and value represented by the brand and the company.



For David J. Morris, CEO of Dillanos Coffee Roasters, Sumner, Wash., his definition of branding is "articulating and optimizing a specific feeling in everything a customer or potential customer sees, feels, hears and tastes related to a business." Morris has been recognized in the specialty coffee industry via various authored stories in leading coffee magazines and national consumer press as "America's Specialty Coffee Brand Coach."

So what role does brand management play in the specialty coffee retail market? A big one, say the experts. "To be competitive, a business must have a brand. It is as important as having a good product," says Karl Speak, president of Beyond Marketing Thought, a brand consultancy in Minneapolis. "Consumers will use the brand as their guide to buy and to understand or differentiate the product. In many categories having a brand is no longer an option, but now is the price of entry. Moreover, many products are so similar that the brand is the only thing that is different. In many cases it is the consumer's perception of the brand that shapes their view of the product itself. For sure, if you poured the same cup of coffee at Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts it would 'taste' different."

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**Bruce Milletto, Bellissimo Coffee InfoGroup**

"A professionally designed simple and memorable logo is step one in brand," Morris says. "But too many business owners have too limited of a view of branding. Advertising in-store, via slapping the logo/theme line on everything in sight, is just the beginning. Your customer greeting, owner's treatment of all customers and employees—even the vehicle the owner drives—is branding. Everything is branding."

Morris points to "America's branding genius," Starbucks founder, Howard Schultz, as a key example of good branding. "However, our customer, It's A Grind—which are quality cafés started in Long Beach, Calif. —is sweeping across America," Morris says. "The brand is strong because its founder, Marty Cox, is a student of guerilla marketing. He is working hard to instill in every franchisee the key to success—an over-the-top commitment to the local community like no company-owned 'chain' can hope to do. It's all about caring enough about your community."

**Bad branding @ work**



Experts define brand as every prospect or customer interaction with your company that creates an impression. But your brand is clearly more than just a logo or an advertisement—it's the personality and soul of a company. When it comes to branding your business—regardless of its size—there are some common mistakes to avoid:

\* Inconsistent messages. A brand is everything from how your phone is answered to the quality of your customer service to the distinctiveness of your menuboards. A strong brand is the result of good experiences, consistent messages and positive, reinforcing images. "When establishing their brand, companies should strive to avoid inconsistent brand messages," says Randy Anderson, owner of Doubleshot Design & Marketing. Anderson provides brand consulting and logo design for specialty food and beverage companies throughout the world. Branding is dependent upon consistency to build trust and strength in a message. For example, signage that gets people confused when ordering, disorganized product displays, or even employees who are inappropriately dressed can send the wrong message about your company's brand.

\* Failure to differentiate. Creativity is the key to differentiation. And differentiating yourself from competitors provides a solid foundation for your brand. For example, if you fail to differentiate yourself in the environment of your store or in the uniqueness of your product offering, you fail to give potential customers a reason to select you rather than the competition. Simply put, make every meeting and event memorable in the minds of your audience.

\* Inconsistent and ineffective corporate identity. From a business logo to store interior and procedures, to packaging design, and even to your Web site—it's critical that each of these elements appropriately represent your business identity. "If one or more of these elements is inconsistent with the total message, you are confusing your audience," Anderson says. Make sure every aspect of your corporate identity is consistently used within your retail locations—even if it entails working closely with vendors who will be implementing your identity across a

variety of media.

\* Improper employee training. Your best customers have formed an image in their minds of what you are, what you do and how you do it. However, all of that can be quickly undone by a misguided employee. Your employees are the walking, talking billboards for your company. Every time someone in your business comes in contact with others, you leave a lasting impression of your brand on their minds.

\* "The single most important part of a coffee shop's brand is its employees. Period," Speak says. "The most compelling brand axiom today is, brand on the outside with consumers is only as strong as the brand on the inside with employees. The second most important part of the brand is the environment in which the coffee is purchased and consumed. The environment of a coffee brand is determined by the people behind the counter and the atmosphere in the shop." Be sure to train your employees to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with your brand message and they will be goodwill ambassadors to your current and prospective customers.

\* Neglecting the public. The biggest mistake many companies make is neglecting PR altogether. "They feel they don't have the time or expertise to write a press release or contact the media," says Kate LaPoint, owner of To The Point Business Imaging, a Seattle-based company specializing in marketing, public relations, writing and editing for companies in the specialty coffee industry. "However, the time one spends on a regular PR effort will almost always pay off in the long run. Building rapport with media and taking the time to 'get the word out' about one's company is extremely valuable in brand-building."

## **Investing in your future**

So, how do specialty coffee retailers ensure a brand retains its essence? It all starts from a clear brand vision up front. "You want to say, 'this is our brand, this is our objective, this is the perception we want our customers, vendors and the overall marketplace to have about us,'" says Bruce Milletto, CEO of Bellissimo Coffee InfoGroup, Eugene, Ore., and author of *Essential and Effective Marketing for the Specialty Coffee*

Retailer.

One of the problems Milletto often sees is that retailers don't brand correctly. "That's one of the things that chains like Starbucks have done so well. They just brand, brand, brand and everyone knows their name," Milletto says. "The key is doing it right the first time. Why would you want to change your logo and your menu board and other merchandise after being in business for a while? Not only is it expensive, but you can also lose customers in the process." Milletto often sees younger or start-up companies say, "I can't afford to hire a good graphic designer right now."

"But I tell them that they can't afford not to hire a good designer because it is so hard to go back and rebrand," he says. "Remember, when you are looking at branding, you aren't simply slapping a logo on a coffee mug, you are looking at a whole concept of your business and the environment where your business resides. The key is to make your brand memorable, relevant and consistent."

Anderson also makes sure his clients understand the importance of doing it right the first time. "That may entail doing initial research to help define their brand, before any concept work is begun, but you need to be clear and not just create and implement a logo without defining a clear direction for the company and your brand," he says.

Dillanos, and a host of other roasters, help in all aspects of graphic identity (logo, cup, menu suggestions and design assistance) at only a small cost. Morris recommends retailers become a student of shoe-leather (guerrilla) marketing, which "uses big imaginations and hard work instead of big budgets to build a solid and growing customer base," he says. "The list of ideas you can employ to become the local coffee spot is nearly endless and open to new twists and approaches."

Creativity isn't just in the way a brand is developed, but it also resides in the marketing communications you use to communicate your brand to the marketplace. LaPoint has found that public relations plays a key role in building

company brands. "The No. 1 way a PR campaign can build one's brand is through credibility," LaPoint says. "Nothing builds a brand more than good press. You can spend all your money on advertising and still not get the same results as through good PR, which is practically free. Seeing a company's name in print, whether in a press release, a news bite or a feature article, will stick in the minds of one's target audience more than an ad, simply because of the mentality: 'Hey, I read about them so they must be good.' Anyone can purchase an ad but it takes a special company to get in a story."

Indeed. Proper brand building also entails companies to clearly define who they are today and where they want to be in the future. And this holds true for small and large retailers alike. In fact, when it comes to building brands, Milletto believes smaller enterprises have a great advantage. "You really do have the advantage as a small retailer, you really know your clientele. You know your neighborhood better than Starbucks does. Some retailer in Des Moines, Iowa, if they've lived there all their life, they know Des Moines better than some cookie cutter chain," Milletto says. "You need to build off of that knowledge to reach your customer base."