

Achieving Brand Integrity

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) deals with issues such as child labour, product safety, genetic modification, environmental pollution, worker conditions, and the implementation of new scientific developments such as nanotechnology and RFIDs.

A key feature of all these issues is that they are effectively invisible to the consumer, as their impacts and the management of those impacts, whether well or badly done, takes place during production and manufacture. The consumer has to take it on trust that these concerns have been properly handled by the company.

Unfortunately, trust is at something of an all-time low - there is a lack of trust in scientists as a result of things like BSE, there is mistrust of government over its decision making processes, as with Iraq, and companies are viewed with endemic scepticism.

The tools that traditional branding uses compound this problem - the use of words and images. The use of 'fluffy' wording and strap lines with terms like, "caring for you", "quality and value" and so on are intended to reassure customers. But most consumers view them as being doublespeak or corporate nonsense. Images suffer the same indifference - putting a picture of smiling people being active outdoors in the countryside alongside a product does influence people to view that product positively. But as the population becomes more media savvy, some will view such imagery with suspicion, while others may read such images as a promise that is not actually being met.

At the moment, the potent impact of 'fluffy bunny landscape' imagery is being deployed unconsciously, with little understanding of its risks or potential.

Techniques for Integrating CSR into Brands

The brandspace must be extended to include other means of communication, ones better suited to conveying information and feelings about these complex and intangible issues. The brand must also be managed to ensure that there is no hypocrisy or risk of being attacked by a cynical media.

'Brand Integrity' can be achieved by making sure that CSR activity is suitably robust, and that the brandspace is congruent with reality.

Some key techniques are:

Traceability - in the food industry, farm to fork traceability has become a vital tool in ensuring product quality - this must be used for non food products as well. The benefits of this traceability must also be communicated to customers, otherwise this powerful distinctiveness will get lost in marketplace noise.

Lightness - do consumers want products made by an inflexible jobsworth bureaucracy? Or by a group of open, intelligent and competent individuals working as a premier-level team? Tread lightly, work effectively, think holistic. This will manifest itself in the product, and give it depth ...

Depth - most design and marketing focuses on the surface appeal of an object. But consumers are starting to be interested in the provenance of the things they buy, the story behind the product. The Japanese have words for this -- 'omote' is surface, 'ura' is depth. Ura is becoming more and more important and must be managed as part of the brand.

Grassroots - CSR is fundamentally about people and their environment. It is best communicated locally and with plenty of informal content. So a quick anecdote told by a staff member to a customer about a product can give a very credible boost to a brand. Activity by local branches, such as contributing volunteers to pond building or litter picking for example, speaks much louder than edicts from head office.

Vision - demonstrating leadership, not being reactive. Set the industry standard and keep moving beyond it. Time and again health or company scandals show that the 'management knew all along this was a problem, but they covered it up'.

Governance - while the City is powerful in its demands for corporate governance, the public is heartily sick of fat cats and enrons, and needs confidence.

The 100 Word Story - how to achieve all this with limited means of communication? The side of a package or a hastily-read POS sign gives barely 100 words to communicate these immensely complex issues. The way forward is through the use of story - compelling little tales about the provenance or a product, about the people who strive to make it the best in terms of quality value and integrity. Small insights into the individuals who make it all possible.

Appointing a Story Manager - someone who collates stories of success and distributes them throughout the organisation. Good understanding of memes and how stories spread essential...

Creating a Context for CSR pride - in most firms, CSR issues are not valued highly enough. This means that there is no internal kudos for innovation and performance in this area. By linking it to customer communication and making it an integral part of the brandspace, a virtuous cycle is created.

Conclusions

CSR is a component of your brand that is rapidly increasing in power, whether it is consciously managed or not.

New techniques and understanding are required to make it work in your favour.

If successfully harnessed, CSR can be the core underpinning of brand integrity and overall business vitality.