



WHAT'S THE 'DIFF?': Creating competitive advantage through a Values-led vs. Goals-led approach!

By Suzanne Tulien, Principal and co-Founder of
The Brand Ascension Group

This article was spawned once again from an experience that jarred me to thinking about the power of brand differentiators and how so many small business owners have an enormous opportunity to leverage and capitalize on them....but just don't. For one reason or another, the same old issue creeps into many small business offices, retail space, mind sets, and employees; "I don't have time to work ON my business brand, because I am too busy working IN it!" I am writing to our valued audiences and shouting from a mountain top "You cannot AFFORD NOT to work ON your business brand!"

Phew! Now that felt better! I hope you were able to hear my authenticity, passion, and urgent tone in that message from all these miles away! This article is going to be short and sweet with some key examples of our client, and non-client differentiators with points about how they are creating their competitive advantage with a little bit of consciousness around consistent distinction.

I recently heard an interview with Stephen Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People, and one amazing concept bounced right out of the CD and hit me across the face while I was driving in my car. I had to hit the back-track button and hear it again as its power began to sink in. He says,

"You cannot effectively solve problems you continuously BEHAVE yourself into."

Read that again. Is it me, or is this not a truly profound way of thinking about changing behaviors to reach your next level of success? Now is the time to begin consciously realizing what you are doing day to day to innovate, strategize, and move your business to the next level as CEO of your company – that is YOUR job.

One of those ways is what this article is about; digging deep to uncover and leverage your true brand differentiators! Some of you on our e-newsletter list have gone through our Brand DNA program which features an entire area on this activity. It is often transformational to the business in that the outputs create a paradigm shift in how the business sees itself and begins to operate. But again, as always the true test in the power of this activity is ACTIONING it consistently.

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1. Are you tired of spending more and more on your marketing efforts with little return on your investment?
2. Do you see lost opportunities with employees who don't consistently create "Wow" experiences for your customers?
3. Are you plagued by price-sensitive customers?
4. Do you suffer from a shortage of customer referrals?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, this may be the most transformational program you will ever attend to define your unique competitive advantage for your business!

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The other day I was thumbing through the latest Oprah magazine and spotted a rare, but highly on-point ad from Starbucks that read:

"IF YOUR COFFEE ISN'T PERFECT, WE'LL MAKE IT OVER. IF IT'S STILL NOT PERFECT, YOU MUST NOT BE IN A STARBUCKS....It's not just coffee, it's STARBUCKS."

Now, these just aren't words on paper, they live and breathe this differentiator, so much so, that they train their 'partners' (employees) to ask patrons consistently if the product is perfect. Do you see how this exposes Starbucks to be vulnerable? They are literally asking for a judgment by the client right there and then – but the mere action of this creates a unique, yet humbling perception of the brand in the client's mind.

This differentiator evolved out of a value attribute they call 'Legendary Service.' Starbucks knows they aren't perfect 100% of the time, but has created a process to ensure the client can express an opinion that gives Starbucks the opportunity to ALWAYS be perfect in their minds! See how this works? Ingenious!

One of our Brand DNA graduate clients uncovered some powerful internally focused differentiators that were never before brought to the forefront of their brand. One of those differentiators discovered was employee tenure: over 50% of their employees have been there for 6 years, and 20% of their employees have been with the company for over 10 years! This is unique in their industry and a big plus for the clients doing business with them, adding a perception of stability and continuity in customer relationships, which this brand prides itself in. Another differentiator related to their employees is that they PAY 100% of employee healthcare benefits! That differentiator is becoming rarer in this economy, but a huge nugget to leverage themselves when it comes to hiring great talent, particularly with the rising costs of healthcare!

On the external side – through a discovery process, their team realized that their products were in every pc and cell phone on the planet! Wow! What a great marketing message to leverage in their advertising, web site, and sales team! Secondly, they've dissected the numbers tracked on their current clients and realized they have a 90+% retention rate; another key differentiator creating competitive advantage. These days that kind of customer loyalty is unheard of. These are just a few examples to illustrate a level of consciousness that occurs when you begin focusing efforts working ON your business versus IN it.

A web site based Brand DNA graduate client knew that its complex data delivery was powerful, but never really thought about detailing out the uniqueness in its characteristics to expose their visitors to the benefits, the true W.I.I.F.M. ('What's in it for me'). Now, without revealing any trade secrets about their proprietary database model, they were able to tout key benefits highlighting the characteristics to the site visitor and re-affirming the unique value of the brand.

If you had this company's completed Brand DNA blueprint (or any of the other examples), you would clearly see that the above differentiator evolved from their Value (Community, Balance, Integrity) and Style (Collaborative, Pioneering, Authentic) attributes

KEY LEARNING POINT: When organizations build their business brands from a values-led (or principle-led) vs. a goals-led standpoint, the strength, consistency, and sincerity of its behaviors evolves organically. The secret is in the Brand DNA defining process, getting crystal clear on what you stand for as a brand and integrating it into all facets of your business; thus taking relevant action to make it tangible for all stakeholders to experience.

I don't know about you, but when I have my customer shoes on and I experience a unique, positive, sometimes awe-inspiring situation that creates an emotional

connection between me and the brand I'm doing business with, I could swear I am in the TWILIGHT ZONE! Unfortunately, in my opinion, it is all too rare when it does occur and it feels like an anomaly. But when it does happen, I feel like a scientist discovering a new species and I make an immediate mental note about the perception I have of that brand to ensure I come back often and tell my friends.

I would be remiss to write this article and not provide you a list of some areas you can begin to flush out, in detail, where you have a true differentiator hiding in your file drawers, or under your computer somewhere! Read through the few areas listed below and see if you can uncover one or two key differentiators that, when actioned, can create a unique competitive advantage in the minds of your customers.

1. **LONGEVITY:** What point of difference do you own in the market that is sustainable over time, can get better with age, and will not quickly become irrelevant, out of style, or out of mind?
2. **DISTINCTIVE OR ONE-OF-A-KIND SKILL SETS:** What quality attributes, credentials, awards, etc., distinguish you from all others in your industry category? (i.e., no one else can lay claim to how you do it!)
3. **PROPRIETARY INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL:** What do you possess and that you can leverage: technology, trade secrets/patents, processes, methods, products, people (certifications, talent, knowledge, etc.)?
4. **UNIQUE BEHAVIORAL ACTIONS:** What behaviors do you demonstrate that are uncommon in the industry and set you apart from your competition (relationship building—remember customers' names and use in conversation at every touch point, service delivery—e.g., overnight, free shipping—both ways, response time—within 1 hour or less, accuracy—99.5% error free, etc.)

We have all experienced a brand that starts some unique action or behavior, like when Block Buster Video trained their employees to acknowledge when customers came in the door with a verbal "hello" from behind their service desk – always a pleasant surprise for as long as they did it. Then one day, it stopped. I'm not sure why, but I sure noticed it when it didn't happen anymore. To me, it was a subtle emotional let-down, almost like when a relationship is giving tell-tale signs it has run its course and it is time to move on.

So, what's the 'diff'? Well, consider this statistic. "94% of your customers WANT to be loyal." Why do businesses just stop giving them reasons not to?

For more information on our step-by-step Brand DNA methodology; now delivered both on-site, and online, go to: www.BrandAscension.com/dna_webinar_weblanding.html.

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