

IT branding: not just a logo

BY JONATHAN COTTON

If you go by the PR of the mega social-media barons, IT is just about the coolest industry you could be in. It's all dynamic, young, t-shirt-wearing entrepreneurial rule-breakers with ultra-hip branding and next generation open-plan offices.

But look beyond the Mark Zuckerburgs of the world and the average IT vendor has nothing of the IT wunderkind PR spin about them. Given that we've got so much to work with, just what is the IT industry's problem when it comes to getting noticed in the super trendy and oh-so-social marketplace? iStart decided to find out...

Branding used to be something you did to your cattle - the stamp of ownership you applied to your product. From these humble and pragmatic beginnings, the branding industry has grown into a complex \$178.5 billion industry in the US alone.

Despite this the term 'branding' remains something of a nebulous one. Ask anyone with a vested interest for a definition of what branding actually is, and you'll likely get a response involving words like 'emotion', 'authenticity' or 'identification'. They'll also tell you what branding isn't. It isn't your marketing, it isn't your logo, and it isn't advertising. Well, of course, it is those things, but it's also something more.

One potentially adequate definition is that brand 'is the sum total of the customer's experience with your company over time; the definition, both intellectual and emotional, of who and what a company is and what it does'.

It follows that a re-branding process is a lot more than a simple logo redesign or colour palette rethink. And while the above definition may still be imprecise, there is, in fact, a concrete method at the heart of a successful branding or rebranding exercise that IT companies can use to elevate their conversations to something more compelling (and lucrative) than features and functions.

Mistaken identity

The first step when building a brand is to establish an idea of what your company 'stands for'. According to the experts this comes down to authenticity. It is the identification of a company's value propositions, a true description of a brand's — that is, its employees' — values, and a holistic strategy as to how these factors are to be communicated to an audience.

"The worst outcome when it comes to branding is to come out with a great concept, but something that is artificial," says Paul Goepfert, marketing manager of Pronto, who spearheaded Pronto's dramatic 2011/2012 rebranding.

"The appropriate outcome of a brand is to create trust, so that people can relate the company and the people to what the brand is saying and the emotion that the brand is giving. If that is not achieved, then the branding is a failure."

The first step of a rebrand then is 'discovery', and for this, the employment of a branding company is all but essential. They will take charge of uncovering the company's 'core attributes' — those things that characterise the company and form a point of difference for the business in the greater industry. This is achieved by interviewing internal staff to establish how staff see themselves and the company; customers to establish what they most identify the brand with; and even prospective clients and lost prospects, to pin down just how a company is viewed in the marketplace.

"All that information is what allows us to build the brand story and the brand attributes. It's taking who we are and actually trying to translate it into the brand identity, which then informs everything else: tone of voice, the logo, the colours, and how we present ourselves on the marketing side of things," explains Pronto's Goepfert.

The IT handicap

It's all well and good to talk about 'who a company really is', however, IT companies generally deal in features and functions rather than people and passion. It can appear an impossible task to put a warm, fuzzy face on a product whose main selling points are increased efficiency and improved metrics.

The curious tendency for IT companies to be extraordinarily self-conscious when it comes to self-promotion compounds the problem. Simone Ellen, director of branding and design agency ellen&ellen, says that it's essential to overcome this unease if

an IT company wants to establish a coherent brand identity in a crowded tech-marketplace.

IT is a hard proposition to articulate from a business point of view. Ellen says, "A lot of IT people are not natural communicators in terms of talking about themselves. Most IT companies would much rather talk about IT."

The problem is that most IT companies are saying the same thing: efficiency gains. But that is not a compelling enough message. "You've gotta tell the story behind it. You've got to show what the client actually gets out of it... and put it in a way that people want to engage with it," Ellen continues.

In the IT space there is also the hurdle of the eight-year sales cycle, as Ellen puts it. Once a company has invested in its software then they are not going to change overnight. IT is not a disposable product, so for IT brands to be successful they need to underline the importance of the long-term client relationship through long-term, sustainable brand building.

There can be little doubt that retailers and makers of consumer products have an easier road in marketing than those in the technology sector. When it comes to describing the value an IT company offers its client, the temptation to retreat into the world of measurements and complex return-on-investment metrics can be strong, but it doesn't connect with an audience.

"We've got to start focusing on what the big picture results are. It's just a matter of telling the story of the end result," says Ellen. "If someone says to me 'I'm going to put in an ERP system in and I'm going to take your headaches away', that's sexy to me, because it means my business is going to run better. We need to stop saying words like 'ERP systems' and start saying things like 'we're gonna give you time to get on with making \$10 million.'"

Lost in translation

Having completed the discovery stage and

defined the key stories, how can IT companies communicate their research in a recognisable, cohesive, and most of all attractive way?

"That's probably the hardest thing," says Goepfert, "it's not just about falling in love with a new logo or a new graphic. The struggle is in translating that brand identity in a way that it actually makes sense. When we rebranded Pronto, we rejected a lot of logos and proposed imagery because it was not a continuation of our brand story."

Ellen of ellen&ellen says that this takes a lot of preparation. You need to be able to understand the company completely. "During the discovery process all these insights will happen because generally no-one's ever looked at the company like that before. You see dysfunctional elements and you >>



also see what's working really well. That gives you an opportunity to distil what makes that business and its culture special. They'll be able to articulate why they are different and why they are special."

It is all about finding the little nugget of inspiration that will lead you down the correct path. Ellen worked with Joanne Collinson from Frank to help her rebrand her company which was originally called blueStar. In this case the nugget was discovering that Joanne's nickname from her staff is 'Frank' because she can, to put it bluntly, be very frank. "We turned this frankness into an asset, the name and the logo, an adamant full stop. Frank people are tenacious, they do whatever it takes to get it right for their customers."

This idea and all the other distilled information was turned into a strategy that was unique to the business and could become part of the organisational strategy. Ellen's next task was to create a visual system that actually expressed all those things.

"What we want to do is make sure that every component of the brand system is up-skilled and doing the best job it can do. That includes language, logo, colourways, photography, websites and all the other promotional activity. With Frank we wrapped the 'frank' idea up in a tattoo because you can't get more indelible than that. Direct, emphatic messages were created to empower Frank people and their clients. They want their clients to drive their software, they are not there to hold hands, nor will they leave them without support. Put it together with some maverick images and Frank, the brand, came to life."

Peter Dickinson, CEO of Greentree says that many rollouts fail because the businesses don't spend quality time establishing a coherent, cohesive message that authentically sums up the company's values. "From the work that we did with our customers, we learned that they believed that we actually primed them for business. We're the engine room, so that's what we say: 'Greentree: Primed for Business'. And we say, unashamedly, 'Making the Complex Simple'. That's our ambition. The other tag we use is 'We've earned our stripes', and that was basically for the UK [promotion], to go out there and create the credibility of what we've done and who we've done it for. It works because there's substance behind all those statements."

So it's all in the preparation. If you're going to do a rebrand you've got to deliver the whole package, so spend whatever time you need to do that successfully. And once you have it all ready, don't hesitate to press play.

Roll out

The roll out for a new branding campaign happens across multiple mediums, but tech companies should follow a set pattern of release in terms of audience: internal staff, partners, customers and



then the public at large.

"It was a tremendous effort to get people to connect to the new Pronto brand on different levels", says Goepfert. "A successful brand should really have an emotional connection with everyone in the business and everyone in the business should be a brand ambassador." When Pronto rebranded they followed the model above to great effect. "There was a tremendous amount of work done because it wasn't just about imagery; we needed to adopt a new tone of voice to reflect our new brand, so that meant rewriting a lot of our marketing material to accurately match the new brand." It can be a long process, Goepfert concludes, but it is worth it.

Measuring the benefits

Famed writer and management consultant Peter Drucker once said: "You can't manage what you don't measure". While the direct return on investment of a marketing exercise may be hard to calculate, there are markers that can provide insight into the impact of a campaign. It all rests on being explicitly clear on the short- and long-term business

objectives upfront and then measuring and evaluating your results against those objectives.

One of the more obvious indicators of a successful rebrand is increases in online activity, such as website traffic and social media attention. "Last financial year we enjoyed one of our strongest growths ever," says Goepfert. While he doesn't attribute this solely to the rebrand ("because we are doing a lot of things") he says it definitely played a part.

"We can see an increase in the number of people looking at our website, which happened almost instantly [after the launch] and has continued. Eight months later we still enjoy 20 percent additional hit rate on our site."

Similarly, branding expert Ellen says that the insights gained from a rigorous re-examination of your brand can translate directly into closed deals, improved networking and customer loyalty. "With effective branding all of a sudden you can say 'this is why you should be working with me', so from a business development point of view you're going to be able to close the sale faster because you can show them how important your system is to them."

This renewed clarity of message and new sales tools also makes it easier for your business to forge new relationships with people. As a brand-led organisation the client has a relationship with the brand, not with the account manager, Ellen concludes.

Lessons learned

A strong brand is one that is honest and authentic. It is something that the whole organisation believes in and can relate to. In the IT sector we need to get up the confidence to promote ourselves unapologetically in this crowded space.

It's like Greentree's Dickinson says: "You've almost got to say: 'rightly or wrongly, this is what we're trying to achieve'."

"This is where I think the IT industry has made a problem for itself," he concludes. "It's strange for such a modern industry, but IT is weirdly conservative. They try not to offend anyone. And if you try not to offend anyone, then you're going to be remembered by no-one. If everything you say is just to appease, then you'll end up with nothing." 