

Steve Miller's Ramblings

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BRANDING, BENCHMARKING, AND THE ELUSIVE “WOW!”

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It's absolutely amazing how the WAY you say something, the way you position something, even the way you manage a relationship can create a response that you desire. I very clearly learned this lesson from my six-year-old daughter, Kelly.

Kelly watches cartoons. Actually, she watches a lot of cartoons. (Unfortunately, I can safely say that Kelly doesn't even *remotely* come close to the amount of cartoons that I watched as a kid. I still love to watch Rocky & Bullwinkle.)

As all you parents know, with kid's cartoons come kid's commercials. And those commercials do a really good job of convincing our children that they absolutely NEED those toys.

This actually started to become a problem. Every time Kelly saw a commercial, she wanted it. “Dad, I really need that battery operated body piercing tool for kids. It's REALLY cool!”

We finally reached a point where we had to put a stop to the whole deal and set down a *House Rule*. (I'm sure you've had those *House Rules*, too. You know, the “No throwing the cat down the stairs to see if she'll land on her feet” rules?)

So we made the TV commercial rule - if Kelly asks for anything she just saw on a commercial, the automatic answer is “No.” Kay and I put this rule into affect, which was used at least thirty times the first hour.

Kelly finally got the message and stopped asking for things she saw on commercials. Until ...

One afternoon Kelly and I are having a close Daddy/Daughter encounter ... we watched Scooby-Doo. A commercial came on for some type of girls make-up kit. I could tell Kelly was *really* watching this commercial. Her eyes were big and she wasn't saying a word. She wanted that make-up kit.

I began to wonder what she was going to do. She knew the *House Rule*. She knew if she asked for the make-up kit I'd say no.

Finally, she turned to me and with those big blue eyes smiling, said: “Daddy, is that something **you’d** like me to have?”

I was dead. She had me. I bought her the make-up kit.

Here was a great example of someone carefully managing her positioning, wording her question just right, and getting me to give her the response she desired.

In a simple way that’s what branding is all about. Branding is a big deal these days and I’ve personally been a brand fanatic for several years now. If you’ve read my column in *Convene* magazine and past *Ramblings*, you know I love this topic.

Branding is creating a covenant between you and your customer base (exhibitors *and* attendees) that goes far beyond isolated or individual transactions. Branding is creating a long-term, trusting relationship/ partnership with the exact right target market. It is reinforced, enhanced, or diminished each and every time the customer has what they consider to be contact with us.

At a meeting of the **Assn.Net** (a group of 18 major associations who meet three times year), we focused on branding. Adrienne Weiss, a branding specialist, led the discussion. She said that creating a successful brand had more to do with the *personal and emotional* attachment than anything else. The bottom line was, she said, that you want to create a club that everybody in your target market wants to be a member of.

But Adrienne also bluntly pointed out that a trade show is a trade show is a trade show. She’d been to many shows as an attendee and didn’t feel any emotional attachment to any of them. They all looked the same and there was no “WOW” to them.

I happen to agree with Adrienne on this point. The trade show industry is, most likely, the second oldest industry on the planet. (I know there’s a joke there, but I’ll let it lay.) But there’s just too much sameness about the entire industry. With only minor differences, if you’ve seen one big trade show, you’ve seen them all. Trade shows have become a commodity.

Don’t feel bad about that. The fact is, thanks to technology, just about everything else in the world has become a commodity, too! Have you looked at the new cars being made today? Can you tell them apart? And you can’t use Quality, Price, and Service to set yourself apart anymore. Those are now the *ante* to get in the game.

That’s why branding is such a hot issue. Major corporations have figured out that the emotional and personal attachment they have with their customers may be the only differentiation that sets them apart. It’s a growing concern.

So how do you go about setting up a brand and making that work successfully for your trade show?

I want to get you started thinking about branding. Maybe you’ve already started. Maybe you’re advertising agency has renamed themselves as a branding agency and is encouraging you to “brand” your show. Maybe you haven’t given it a thought. Regardless, I want to plant that seed.

The human mind is teleological. That's a big, fancy word consultants love to use. It simply means we're goal seeking. Whatever our dominant objective is for today will be the direction our minds will try to take us. Whatever we plant into our brains, even subliminally, will direct our thoughts.

I remember when I decided to buy a Jeep Grand Cherokee. Literally the day I made that decision, two interesting phenomena occurred. First, I rapidly became more and more dissatisfied with my current car, even though it was just fine. And second, I couldn't believe how many Jeep Grand Cherokees were out on the roads!

The fact was all those Jeep Grand Cherokees had been on the road all the time. I just wasn't mentally "tuned" into them. This happens to us all the time. The next time you're on the road just look and see how many Jeeps you see!

The point I'm making is that I want to "tune" you in to thinking about branding. I want you to start actively looking and studying all the great and not-so-great brands out there in the world. In fact, I want to make this a true project for you.

In Part One of the project, I want you to keep a keen eye out for two types of brands.

The first type is the "World-Class Brand." These would be the really well-known brands. I'll give you a few starters:

- Coca-Cola
- McDonalds
- Disney
- American Express
- Starbucks

Make a list of these brands that are ubiquitous, seemingly everywhere. You can make a mental note, but I'd recommend you actually write them down.

Then look for a second type of brand - the kind that aren't necessarily well-known (although they certainly could be).

This second type would be those brands (companies, products, services) that you feel a personal attachment to. For example, we've got a local printer who we feel a strong attachment to. They aren't really convenient to us, since we moved from downtown Seattle over 12 years ago. But they do such a good job of taking care of us; they make us feel so important, that we wouldn't think of using another printer. Heck there are probably a couple hundred closer than these guys, but we won't change. They have successfully branded themselves to us.

Over the next couple of months, keep your eyes open to add brands to the list.

After you've observed both group's brands, make an effort to study them from a benchmarking perspective. Then take your list and brand by brand, take yourself through these questions:

- When you think about these brands, what expectations do you automatically think of? In other words, what feelings and perceptions do you have?

For example, if you list Nordstrom, then what does Nordstrom make you think of? Exceptional, almost legendary customer service? No-questions-asked, money-back return policy? Great selection of high-quality merchandise? The piano playing while you shop?

- In your most recent experience with that brand, what did they do to reinforce, enhance, or diminish those perceptions? If you went into Nordstrom, did you get treated the way you expected? Did your experience maintain your current perception, did it raise your perception, or did it disappoint you?

- Take the following question and insert the name of the brand you're studying: If <Brand> were to create and produce a new trade show, what would THEY do differently from what we're doing?

So if we insert Nordstrom in that sentence, what would Nordstrom do? Would they institute a no-questions-asked, money-back return policy for exhibitors who were unhappy with the show? Would they get *all* show employees (temps, bus drivers, union workers, show staff, etc.) to give exceptional customer service to both exhibitors and attendees?

- What can you learn from that brand that you CAN take back to your show?

One of my biggest complaints about the dullness of the trade show world comes from the fact that most shows look at other shows for new ideas. All this does is create a world where all shows look and act alike. Beautiful aisle signage at one show all of a sudden is cloned at two others, then four, then eight, and so on.

To get new ideas, we must look outside the trade show world for new ideas. Hey, the idea for a drive-up window at your local fast food eatery originally came from the banking industry! Velcro on NASA space suits came from the simple little burr that grabs your pant legs in the woods.

But also look to the personal, emotional attachments that you've got with the different brands. How can you create THAT at your show?

In Part Two, I'll discuss some of my own branding benchmarks, analyzing why I choose them and what I think we can learn.

Steve Miller, Kelly's Dad and a strategic director, works with both show management and corporations worldwide, advising them on competitive advantage and innovation. He also speaks to business groups around the world on corporate strategy. His website is www.theadventure.com.

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