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Since 1979, Optima Group has stood apart in providing financial services firms insight-driven expertise, real-world acumen and creative excellence. From strategic inception to idea implementation, Optima Group will help your firm connect with your prospects, clients and employees.

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We all know we are not in Kansas anymore. The explosion which started with Facebook in a Harvard dorm room in 2004, was joined by Twitter in 2006, and now includes dozens of popular social media sites and billions of users, is reshaping the way the market acquires, digests and acts on information. For marketers, and particularly for brand managers, this watershed change in communications technology has profound implications. Brand managers are tasked with controlling a message across multiple media mechanisms which increasingly involve interactive conversations, as much among customers and prospects as between the company and its target buyers. How does a brand manager control these conversations so that the brand message gets delivered accurately and effectively?

The simple answer is integrated branding.

According to Tracy Hubbard, award-winning Creative Director at Optima Group, *“Integrated branding requires producing a consistent experience across all customer touchpoints and information outlets. This means that products/services, messaging and branding, and the customer’s expectations and experience should all be in line and mutually reinforcing.”*

To build an integrated brand, an organization first needs to understand what customers and prospects expect from the brand, consistently deliver it, and then control the conversation around this reality.

On that note, let’s take a look at Domino’s® — the pizza everybody loves to hate — or at least they used to. At the end of 2009, Domino’s released “Domino’s Pizza Turnaround”, a “documentary” posted on YouTube, and later on their blog, showing in embarrassing detail just what people thought about their pizza:

“The crust is like cardboard.”

“The sauce tastes like ketchup.”

“The cheese doesn’t taste like anything. What is that anyway?”

To Domino’s great credit, not only did they listen — they have become one of the leading advocates of integrating their message, their product, and their customers’ experiences into a cohesive, innovative marketing strategy.

On their blog, “more.dominos.com,” they offer ten different ways for customers to interact with their brand, including the “Behind the Pizza” game which animates their ingredients, the heavily advertised “Pizza Tracker,” the “Show Us Your Pizza” feedback loop and photo contest, and even the whimsical “Pizza Proverbs.” How can a company that is this open and transparent about their problems have a *stock price that has more than doubled* in less than a year? The answer is that they entered into, and took control of, the conversation and listened to their public. They personalized the company and recreated a product consistent with their new “personality”, or brand. Then they institutionalized the conversation in their marketing effort and communications outlets to sustain the positive interactive relationship with customers and prospects. They “friended” the public.

BANK BRANDS IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD

The financial services industry has weathered its share of storms recently. In Forrester’s annual “Customer Advocacy” study, the research firm asked 4,500 bank customers whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: *“My financial provider does what’s best for me, not just its own bottom line.”*

Credit unions were the most trusted financial institutions in the United States, with 70% of members saying their credit union looked out for their best interests. Bigger banks did not do so well. Banks are consistently among the least-trusted brands in Forrester’s study, but in 2009, HSBC broke a record. One of the world’s biggest banks got the lowest customer advocacy score ever reported in the U.S., down a full 10% from 2008.

While the situation appears bleak for banks, there is a way out of the forest. However, it may take a few shots of brutal honesty with a heavy chaser of willingness to change.

Percentage of Customers Who Distrust Their Bank	
HSBC	84%
Citi	74%
TD	72%
Capital One	71%
Chase	69%
Bank of America	67%

Source: 2010 TheFinancialBrand.com

GETTING BACK ON SOLID GROUND

As you begin the process of changing your brand management effort, Tracy Hubbard advises, *“When tackling something as daunting as a branding integration effort, it’s critically important to start by taking a step back.”*

1. Take Stock What do your customers think about you? It is absolutely amazing how few companies — particularly financial services companies — can honestly answer this question. Be brave like Domino’s and ask the basic questions: Are you happy with the products and services you are getting from us? Why or why not? How can we do a better job? You’ll be surprised at what you learn.

2. Map Your Brand Prospects don’t just magically turn into customers and then into advocates or referral sources. All customers, at some point in their lifecycle, make purchase decisions. With consumer products like pizza, this happens frequently. For financial services customers, it usually happens as the result of a significant life change, deep dissatisfaction with their current provider, or because of a trusted referral. That means you need to be on top of what is going on with your prospects and customers at each stage of their consumer lifecycle:

a. Awareness How do prospects become aware of your brand? Advertising, Google® search, direct marketing? What is the impression you are seeking to make on them? How do you maintain this awareness until they are ready to buy?

b. Research How do prospects learn more about your offer? Look at your public website, ask a friend? Are there multiple ways for them to do this? As they take a closer look at your products and services, is your brand delivering on the promise that made them seek you out in the first place?

c. Purchase Is it easy for your prospects to complete their purchase decision? Online, in-person, over the phone? Is it easy for your employees to close the sale? Do they ask for, receive and manage feedback about your new customer’s experience?

d. Utilize Once your prospect has become a customer, how easy is it for them to do business with you? Do you offer all of the channels or methods they are looking for? In-person, phone center, customer website, mobil app? How do you know when those methods start to change? Is your organization really on top of new media and service delivery methods?

e. Advocate So your new customer really loves you – how does he or she let other people know? Testimonial, survey responses, social media? Do you make it easy for him to let other people know he “likes” you?

Here’s an example of a quick checklist to see tactically if you know where and how your brand is being represented or promoted during each stage of the customer lifecycle. This is also an excellent time to catalog all sub-brands (divisions or lines of business) and product brands that may have proliferated within your organization. Are they really necessary? Do they all work together? Are they all supportive of the primary brand?

Media/ Touchpoint	Awareness	Research	Purchase	Utilize	Advocate
Advertising: TV, Radio, Internet, Outdoor, Social	√	√			
Public Website	√	√	√		
Client Website				√	
Direct Marketing:					
Traditional and Electronic	√				
Campaign-Specific Microsites	√	√	√		
Blog on Public Website					√
Branch Signage	√	√			
Branch Personnel / Feedback	√	√	√	√	√
Printed Marketing Materials	√	√	√		
Downloadable					
Marketing Materials	√	√	√		
Facebook Page	√				√
Twitter Account					√
Solicit Testimonials					√
Ongoing Customer Surveys and Feedback Loops			√	√	√
Customer Service Center Monitoring		√	√	√	√
Customer Statements / Stuffers				√	
Events / Sponsorships / “Pop-Up” Marketing	√	√	√	√	√

3. Get Your Ears On There are companies popping up every day which can help you monitor social networks and blogs for mention of your brand or your competitors' brands. (Clickable, Vitruv, Buddy Media, Radian6 (now owned by Salesforce.com) are a few that come up regularly in the blogosphere.) Until you have a robust social media management capability in place, you may need to divert issues surfaced in the social forum to traditional customer service channels. But it is still crucial to listen. The market will tell you what you need to change.

COMING OUT FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN

We all know how angry we were with the wizard after we found out he was a bully and a fake. Don't let that be the fate of your brand! Now that you have done the hard work of figuring out where your brand stands, the real magic begins. To illustrate how this has been done effectively, let's take a look at the success story of the financial brand, ING DIRECT USA.

ING DIRECT USA was launched by the Dutch financial firm ING in September 2000, offering simple financial products to meet the needs of "main street" America. ING DIRECT USA offered internet-based high yield savings products, payment accounts, mortgage loans, and investment services. In 2007, they acquired ShareBuilder, an investment service with no account minimums, reduced commissions, no maintenance fees - tailored to make investing easy for the "main street" consumer. ING DIRECT USA is now the largest savings bank in the country.

The last sentence of that paragraph is the most profound — ING DIRECT USA is now the largest savings bank in the country with over 7.5 million customers after being in business for just over ten years. They did this as a company with foreign ownership, no branch network (although they do have seven "Café" locations in major cities throughout the country) and only 2,275 employees. How? Simple — they gave people what they want: simplicity, convenience and one of the highest savings rates in the country. You can open an ING savings account online which is linked to your regular checking account.

It takes about five minutes, just as promised. They tell you exactly what to expect, and that is exactly what happens. No fees, no minimums, no need to change banks. Take a quick trip to their website home.ingdirect.com to see what simple, effective brand management looks like.

So what are the characteristics of the ING DIRECT USA brand which have made it so successful?

- **Simplicity** – only what you need. Their tag line is: “Save your money®”
- **Strong graphic/visualizations** – commitment to the color orange
- **Clear** – “No fee. No minimums. No need to change banks.”
- **Integrity** – they deliver on their brand promise

GET ON THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

So how can you drive a brand transformation like Domino's? We have talked about how to map all of your brand impressions through the touch points of your customers' lifecycles. The next step is to integrate your brand messages and characteristics across all of your business lines. While there will be differences between consumer and B2B channels, the fundamental attributes of your brand should be consistent regardless of the audience or delivery method.

CREATE A BRAND MAP



KEEP A WEATHER EYE ON THE HORIZON

With the capabilities of technology changing at blinding speed, you can bet that social media will not be the last twister to blow through the corporate landscape. Brands, like organizations and people, grow and change all the time. Mergers and divestitures are an excellent time to take a fresh look at whether or not your brand structure is doing a good job of supporting your corporate objectives.

Another certainty is that the composition of your customer base — and your revenue stream — will continuously evolve. While Boomers and Seniors might represent the majority of your consumer revenue now, Gen X and Gen Y customers — and their businesses — have different needs and preferences. The same can be said for different ethnic markets. To ensure your organization and your brand are well positioned for future growth, you should also be tuning in to what these customers want.

Am I clear? No? Great!

Groupon, saying it wants to be “transparent” about a “lack of transparency,” announced that it will change how it reports the number of daily deals sold, an effort to make it harder for researchers to predict its growth. *Bloomberg*

OR YOU CAN JUST STAY BEHIND THE CURTAIN

To leave you on a light note, not everyone embraces the new world of transparency. Groupon has decided to go with a more opaque strategy as witnessed by the clipping (left) from the *New York Post* on October 11, 2011.

IS IT BETTER TO BE A GOOD WITCH OR A BAD WITCH?

The answer is, “It depends.” In his book *Wicked* (1995), Gregory Maguire turned the Land of Oz on its head. For the first time, we see the Land of Oz from the perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West. When Dorothy triumphed over the Wicked Witch of the West in L. Frank Baum’s classic tale *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), we heard only her side of the story. But what about her arch-nemesis, the mysterious witch? Where did she come from? How did she become so wicked?

Gregory Maguire creates a fantasy world so rich and vivid that we will never look at Oz the same way again. *Wicked* is about a land where animals talk and strive to be treated like first-class citizens, and Munchkinlanders seek the comfort of middle-class stability. And then there is the little green-skinned girl named Elphaba, who will grow up to be the infamous Wicked Witch of the West. In *Wicked*, she is a smart, prickly and misunderstood creature who challenges all our preconceived notions about the nature of good and evil.

After almost 100 years as one of the most feared storybook characters in modern times, Mr. Maguire profoundly changed The Wicked Witch’s brand. You can change yours too. Find out what your customers and prospects are saying about you, and if you need to, rewrite the story.

Interested in help with your brand?
Is it time for a brand assessment?
Do you need your brand’s design
guidelines updated or developed?
We can help. Please contact us
to schedule a meeting:

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