

Building Trust. Building a Brand: Should There be a Chief Brand Trust Officer Responsible for the Brand?

By Dan Logan

I recently took a vacation and visited South Dakota, home of the famous Wall Drug. It's a company that has always fascinated me, in part because of their simple yet savvy advertising (those Wall Drug bumper stickers you'll see almost anywhere? They're given away for free). But marketing is not what makes them great. Consistency is.

Wall Drug is a family-owned business in the middle of nowhere that drew in customers during the Great Depression by offering weary travelers a free glass of fresh, cold water, and, later a five-cent cup of coffee.

Today, you can still get free fresh water at Wall Drug, and coffee for five cents. And you can get a whole lot more. They've always understood what travelers want, and, through that understanding, forge a connection. Eighty years later, Wall Drug is a great brand in every way, liked and trusted and looked for by anyone traveling western South Dakota.

This is striking at a time when so many businesses seem to have forgotten the importance of trust, of being liked. Bank of America. Toyota. Wachovia. BP. So many huge global brands have lost their way of late. Did they get too big? Did they lose sight of the importance of their customers and clients? Is it easier to stay true to the promise you're making when you're small, or privately-held? What can companies of all sizes do to protect their most important asset: The promise of their brand?

First, what do we mean by "brand promise." It's simple. It is the thing your customers or clients believe you can give them. It could be as basic as a glass of cold water after a long drive, or as nuanced as a trusted financial advisor. It's knowing that the package will get there on time, that the car will be safe, that your money is secure. In the end, ONLY the customer can tell you if you deliver on your brand promise, and oftentimes, the answer is not as black and white as we might like.

That's partly because trust can be a squishy thing. It is both logical *and* emotional. And, to earn it, you may need to do more than simply deliver the desired product. But, in many industries, trust may be the most important component of your brand. Think about healthcare, insurance and banking, technology. The consequences of misplaced trust can be devastating, and brands that don't deliver on the faith their customers place in them won't keep those customers for long.



trinity marketing
180 canal street
boston, ma 02114

t: 617.292.7300
f: 617.292.7400

www.trinitynet.com

Of course, our perspective on brands and trust depends a lot on our personal experience. Our education, our careers. I've worked for three companies in my adult life. A big, employee-owned Manhattan ad agency, a financial services firm controlled by a mutually-owned insurance company, and my own closely-held Trinity, which over the years has worked with a broad range of firms both large and small. Based on these experiences, I have a few observations:

- Small private companies have a defacto keeper of the brand trust, their owners. There is someone who's name is on the front door, who often founded the company and still takes a hands-on role. That's great for accountability. But sometimes these entrepreneurs can struggle to understand the true dynamics of what makes a customer trust their brand.
- When clients and owners are the same, a la Northwestern Mutual, Vanguard or USAA, management has a strong incentive to stay focused on making good on their promise to the customer. But these structures are rare in most industries.
- And, with size comes complexity. Big companies, especially big public companies, get pulled in many directions. And while they certainly value their customers, it's easy to lose sight of the promise behind your brand.

So, what do you do about it? Whether you're Wall Drug, promising free water, or Wells Fargo, promising that "together we'll go far," how do you create both emotional and logical trust in your offering, and then deliver on it? Here are three ideas, no matter your size.

Put someone in charge

Who in your company is responsible for delivering on your brand promise? Your advertising and marketing folks have a role to play—they help to create that unique sense of trust, after all—but delivering on trust takes a broader effort than the marketing department can offer. In a small or private business, the boss is often the logical candidate. His or her name is on the door, right? Yet a CEO has lots of responsibilities that seem more urgent on a day-to-day basis than something as ephemeral as "brand trust."

So why not put someone specifically in charge? The idea of a "chief brand trust officer" may seem redundant on the surface, but it's an important job to think about, especially when you consider the consequence of losing the trust in your customers.

Communicate the importance of brand trust across your organization

The only people who can tell you if you're trusted are your clients and customers. In the end, branding is more about the experience these people have with your product than it is about advertising or promotions. Every day, millions of people interact with the hundreds of thousands of people who work at big banks, insurers, computer companies, etc. If those front-line employees don't deliver on the promises you're making, trust in your brand will erode. Visit an Apple Store, talk to a USAA client, go to Wall Drug, and you'll quickly realize that their people are their brand. And these people are worth more to your brand promise than the greatest website ever built.

Make people notice

One way to build the trust of your customers and clients is simply to signal that you care about it. Just putting the topic on the table in an overt manner can get the attention of everyone who has a stake in your brand. This is another advantage of literally putting someone in charge of brand trust. Look at the successes of strong, well-understood brands like Vanguard or Northwestern Mutual; customers know what they stand for. Look at failures, too; you'll often see a lot of conflicting messages. And once you know the course you want to take in building trust, make sure everyone in your organization is on the same page.

We at Trinity Marketing think this is an important topic, and one we've worked on with all sorts of companies for the last 16 years. We'd love to talk further about it with you. Contact us at 617.292.7399 or dlogan@trinitynet.com.