

Brand, or be branded: branding vs marketing

What should come first, branding or marketing? According to branding (and marketing) expert Darren Taylor, it's branding, hands down. Rush into marketing without a well-defined brand, and your customers will do the job for you, in a way you probably won't like one bit.

Marketing is the brightest star in the constellation of communication disciplines. But then why wouldn't it be – it's **MARKETING!** Universities don't offer degrees in branding. If you want a degree you have to go into Marketing or Communications. My own background is in marketing. There weren't any branding degrees or even certificates when I went to uni. At best, you might find a branding class offered as part of a marketing course, taught, naturally, by a marketing person. And that professor would preach the marketing gospel – that branding is a part of marketing.

I'd like to challenge that by offering the opposite paradigm: marketing is a part of branding. And to keep with the cosmic metaphor of stars and constellations, I'd like to posit that branding is the Higgs particle of commerce.



Image: Supplied

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The Higgs boson is the sub-atomic particle first theorised by Oxford physicist **Peter Higgs** and recently discovered using the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research. It was the first branded sub-atomic particle or, in any case, the best branded one, for the media called it the 'God particle', because our universe wouldn't exist without it.

Of course, like many brands, it was misunderstood, and I don't understand it either. But a physicist friend enlightened me by explaining that it's more useful to think of the Higgs as a field rather than a particle – bosons can be either particles or waves. If you imagine the Higgs as waves, then it creates a field, like light waves or gravity waves. In that explanation, the Higgs field exists everywhere and gives mass to the particles that make up all matter. An electron gets its mass by interacting with the Higgs field. No Higgs, everything disappears. Yet the Higgs itself is so subtle it took physicists decades and a multi-billion-dollar machine to detect it.

Atoms and molecules, planets and stars get all our attention. So it is with marketing. Branding is the Higgs, quietly making waves in the background that allow marketing to exist in the first place. Because you can't have marketing without a brand to sell.

Many companies don't know their brand, but that doesn't mean their brand doesn't exist. The generic corner 'Restaurant' in TV show *Seinfeld* doesn't make any effort to brand, but that only means its customers get to brand it.

The most famous soup vendor in the world is a fictional character, also from *Seinfeld*, called the 'Soup Nazi'. This vendor didn't try to brand himself, so his customers did.

The brand 'field' can be strong or weak, influenced by companies or customers, but like the Higgs, it is always there.



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You should brand yourself first, before any marketing, because it's better to be a big fish in a small pond than plankton in the ocean.

Scientists are smart. They know that if they want to understand the universe they must pay attention to the Higgs. But it took a long time for marketers to get the message that if they want to do successful marketing they need to understand the brands they are marketing. Some organisations still don't get that. Those are the ones who come to people like me at the eleventh hour.

So, brand comes first. But many organisations develop marketing strategies without having a branding strategy. I ask, how do they know what they're marketing?

They don't. They think just because they have a blog, or buy a full-page colour ad, or post 100 Tweets a day, people are going to buy their product.

Look at blogging. Everyone is blogging these days. One of the most over-saturated fields is travel blogging. People think, "Wouldn't it be cool to get paid for travelling? I'll just start a blog. The barrier to entry is low and lots of people are making money, why can't I?" And they post frantically, because everyone tells them you have to post every week, or every other day, or twice a day. Content is king.

And then you get your friends to subscribe and then beg for 'likes', for 'shares'. You promote influential bloggers and guest post whenever you can, in exchange for them plugging your blog. And you spend months churning out worthless content to subscribers who have stopped reading. Then you think, "Maybe I should start a food blog instead." But the truth is, you're a pin next to a jackhammer, and you'd be better off asking yourself what is special about you and then trying to brand that, because it's better to be a big fish in a small pond than plankton in the ocean. ➤

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Marketing gets the message out, marketing seduces. But it is the brand that differentiates and makes the message stand out.

Marketing seduces consumers, but marketing itself is seductive. It holds out the promise of easy success. How many times have I heard clients say they would have done better if only they had more money for marketing? They think marketing is the solution to all their problems.

They think, "We have to get the word out". But what is that word, exactly? It amazes me how entitled some organisations feel. This is especially true of not-for-profits. They think Jane is going to donate money just because they have a good cause, because they deserve to reach their campaign goals. But how many good causes do you think there are out there? How many cancer charities, NGOs, educational foundations? Marketing gets the message out, marketing seduces. But brand differentiates.

And what about organisations that rely on government funding for their survival? These are the most entitled organisations of all. They make the critical mistake of equating their history with their brand. But I'm telling you, if your brand is not more than your history, you may be history!

I had a client, a government-funded not-for-profit, that had been very successful. Every couple of years they went back to Canberra for another round of funding. And this went on for many years, until one day the government said, we don't need you anymore. You do research in an industrial sector that no longer exists in Australia.



Image: Shutterstock

So what did the organisation do? They asked me to change their name. Now sure, they needed to change their name, because their name reflected the sector that no longer existed. But what were they going to do? What were they qualified to do? They were facing an existential crisis. An earthquake had just hit

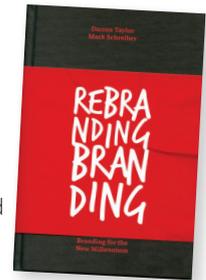
and they wanted to paint their awning.

The problem was, they had been marketing themselves to the government, not branding themselves. So the government did the branding for them. The government branded them as experts in a single, disrupted sector rather than as researchers who could do useful work across several industries.

Returning to our stellar metaphor, imagine if NASA, the US space agency, had made that mistake. They'd be out of business. Because what they first went into business to do – send a person to the moon – isn't something they can get funding for anymore. All the marketing in the world isn't going to result in another taxpayer-funded manned mission to the moon. But they didn't brand themselves as a 'manned spaceflight agency' but as a 'space agency'. And because they branded wisely, we're seeing images of Jupiter and Pluto that marketers like **Elon Musk** and **Richard Branson** can use to promote inexpensive manned spaceflight that relies on private, not public, funding.

About the author

Darren Taylor is the managing director and head of strategy and research for Taylor & Grace, a Melbourne-based brand strategy agency.



Find out more and get a copy of Darren's book, *Rebranding Branding*, on www.taylorandgrace.com.au

So, branding comes before marketing. A marketing strategy should be based on a brand strategy. Whether you are a person, a company, a corporation, or a country – whether you are **Taylor Swift** or the Soup Nazi, you have something to offer others. Take that something and build your brand around it. Then take that brand and build your marketing around it.

But branding also comes after marketing. Imagine you're a company that's just concluded a successful marketing campaign. You have loads of money under your mattress. What are you going to do with it?

How you answer that question depends a lot on how you see your brand. If you're a boutique beer brand, beloved in your city, family-owned for generations, you may want to modernise your brewery. If you're a national beer brand you may want to buy up a rival beer company. If you're a global beverage company, with a beer brand, you might expand to bottled water.

Google has made almost a google's worth of dollars. Well, not quite, but they've had quite a bit of cash lying about. Their mission statement is to 'organise the

Good branding helps make companies money, and it should also guide them on how to spend it.

world's information'. This is one of the best mission statements I've ever read, because it's clear without being limiting.

It doesn't say, 'We're a search engine company.' Their founders understood search engines might be supplanted by new technologies, and in any case they were more ambitious than just telling us what the best cat videos are.

Yet what does organising the world's information have to do with robotic cars? I don't know, but for years Google has been allocating vast resources to developing and testing self-driving cars. This wasn't a publicity stunt, and they may never sell a self-driving car.



Google Glass has been another major project that, to date, has not paid off commercially.

But Google's founders believe in scientific creativity. They famously encourage their engineers to spend 20% of their time on their own projects. So no one, except perhaps their shareholders, is asking what Google is doing behind the wheel of the self-driving car.

Branding helps make companies money, but also guides them on how to spend it.

We need to re-brand branding to differentiate ourselves from marketing, to show that, like the Higgs, our influence is felt everywhere, even if the only thing you see is the shiny star of a logo.

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