

## **Creating powerful brand websites – a common sense approach**

**Abstract:** Brand custodians have been quick to recognize the potential of websites in brand building. With most papers on branding through websites written by design houses and technology houses, the focus is less on brand and more on design/navigation/effects. Consequently brand custodians often feel that the task of setting up a brand website is enormously complicated and procrastinate in this regard. Other brand custodians carried away by the immense potential that websites offer, try too much though to little effect. It is important to have a set of guidelines that help brand custodians set up optimized brand websites that are pleasing to their site visitors.

**Creating brand websites for brand building – an optimization approach:** Most brand custodians recognize the power of the web as a tool for branding. The versatility that technology provides, the ease of operation that the web offers, the immense amount of relevant information that can be communicated simply yet impactfully gives brand custodians good reasons to set up websites for their brands. (These websites are called ‘brand’ websites or ‘branding’ websites.) Often it is the desire to maximize the impact from the website that makes brand custodians try too hard and the result is often a brand website that delivers a brand experience that is under par.

There are several articles on the use of websites as tools for branding - some dwell on technology and others on the philosophy of ‘branding’ websites – but few articles explain the required perspectives to developing brand based websites and the simple guidelines involved in developing effective ‘brand’ websites. While the volume of information at hand can sometimes be intimidating, at other times articles exaggerate the complexity of the task. The perceived need for understanding technology and the use of new fangled terms like ‘intuitive navigation’ makes the task of creating a good website seem terribly complex and requiring enormous effort.

Several articles written on the use of websites in brand building are idealistic and set the minimum acceptable level of brand websites too high for brand custodians to wish to set up a website for their brands. It is not surprising that many brand custodians either do not put up a website for their brand or alternatively put up a shoddy site that is termed as an ‘interim’ site.

This paper sets down a set of guidelines that will help brand custodians develop websites that work for their brands. The emphasis of this paper is on optimizing not maximizing the potential of the web for a brand through its website; maximizing is the next step based on each custodian’s resources level. This paper is a common sense approach to using branding principles to create effective websites for brands. The focus is on providing a set of guidelines that allow brand custodians with limited understanding of the Internet, technical knowledge, time and resources arrive at an optimal website for their brands.

The following 20 guidelines can help create powerful brand websites:

- a) *Express the brand's personality:* The ease with which brands can communicate their personality through their website is amazing (though most people opt for the tougher more complex approach). Identity and personality can be conjured up through simple effects. Something as simple as the voice of the celebrity endorsing the brand welcoming the site visitor to the site could itself have a powerful impact on the site visitor. Offline design elements and brand properties carried online can provide a familiar and welcoming feel to the site. [www.nike.com](http://www.nike.com) is a good example of how a brand can communicate brand image and personality powerfully through their website. Consumers often appreciate the fact that the brand has maintained consistency and has not been seduced by the web into creating a radically different e-personality.
- b) *Content first, tech next:* It is not always essential to have a hi-techno scream blast effect on site visitors. Research indicates that there are many surfers who are not very technology friendly and that there are many novice surfers joining the ranks of the Internet every day. Too many hi-tech effects requiring downloads of software from different sites can intimidate these surfers.

A surfer who is not very Internet savvy would most likely be seeking reassurance from brands as familiar faces in an unfamiliar environment. A complicated hi-tech site may leave the visitor bewildered and not too happy about the online brand experience. Sometimes less can do more with many surfers finding hi tech effects a poor substitute for meaningful content. Giving the visitor options to view the site in basic or hi effect form would be a much-appreciated feature. Hi-tech effects can be demonstrated in the hi-tech effect version.

- c) *Emphasize differentiation:* Research indicates that most brands derive their equity from their differentiation from competition. The brand's website needs to drive this differentiation home to build on this which is the basis of the consumer-brand relationship. Differentiation is integral to the brand's DNA – everything that represents the brand has to reflect the differentiation. Whether it is price differentiation or even image differentiation – differentiation can easily be emphasized powerfully through brand websites. Some websites give elaborate explanations of how their brand offers significant economies to their consumers while other brands use websites to explain the brand's tradition of quality to create image based differentiation.
- d) *Ensure that the site reflects the brand's values:* Every brand has a unique set of values that form its very essence. Communicating these values through the website is of paramount importance as this is the charter of the brand. Knowing the brand's values and the direction of its charter is important to anyone who wishes to have an enduring relationship with the brand. The website gives interested visitors an opportunity to understand these values better and the opportunity to forge a more meaningful relationship with the brand's constituents.

- e) *Information about the brand:* Many site visitors visit brand sites to know about the brand – its antecedents, its vision, etc. Irrespective of whether site visitors want to know about the brand or not – it is always reassuring to have an ‘About Us’ section as this indicates transparency and openness.

Details of offices, locations, email ids, nature of ownership of the company, place and date of incorporation, number of years in existence etc are always available through offline sources to people who really want them. Putting up these facts in an easily navigable manner gives visitors a feeling of confidence and transparency that is very important especially in today’s environment of low trust levels. Analysts, media people, potential employees/ investors /associates and channel partners find this section of immense use – and these are important audiences for a brand.

- f) *Education on brand selection:* A large number of people visiting brand websites do so in order to understand whether the brand is relevant to them or not. Education on brand choice should not be restricted to stating your brand’s case. At times consumers may not know whether they need the category itself.

Consumers need to be educated on the different categories of products that can serve their needs in the context in which they are planning to use your brand. A consumer who is looking at a brand of paint may not know that he actually needs distemper for that particular application and not paint itself. A brand may lose out on a sale by providing such information but it can earn appreciation and positive WOM through this route that in time can bring in more sales.

- g) *Product specifications:* Many prospective consumers want to know the product specifications of brands. Knowing the tolerance levels for industrial products, side effects for healthcare formulations, presence of a specific ingredient for edible products, etc is critical for decision-making. Equally important for a brand is communicating the kind of tests conducted for product quality and the brand’s performance on these parameters. For example: If a cement brand is supposed to withstand 53 kilos of weight per square inch to qualify for a certain grade then consumers may want to know whether the brand qualifies for this grade convincingly or only scrapes through in the performance test.

Many strong brands soar above the required quality levels while competition barely exceeds the quality levels. Some brands have ethical quality levels that are far higher than the government/industry specified levels. Websites give brands a good opportunity to share this kind of information that helps prospects/ consumers develop a better appreciation of the brand.

- h) *Best uses:* It is commonly believed that no one knows how to get the best out of a brand more than the company manufacturing the brand. Giving tips on the best way to use the brand is a good way of convincing consumers about the brand's commitment to its consumers. Maintenance tips too help in terms of reassuring consumers of the brand's intent to play fair with the consumer.
- i) *Suggest more uses for the brand:* Informing consumers of more uses for the brand helps to increase brand usage and consequently drives higher sales. But importantly this information is of great use to consumers who are comfortable with the usage of a brand. These consumers may therefore prefer using the same brand for other purposes rather than using a different brand for these purposes. Web pages with such forms of relevant information add tremendously to providing a positive brand experience online.
- j) *Education related to the need satisfied:* One of the areas where many marketers are short sighted is that they are so pre-occupied in their marketing function that they forget /do not recognize the fact that consumers buy their brand to satisfy a need. In this context, information pertaining to that need is welcome. If the brand offers skin care solutions consumers of the brand would welcome information on skin care and different means of taking care of one's skin. Provision of such information also demonstrates the brand's expertise and commitment to consumers needs.
- k) *Brand heritage:* There are many brands that have an interesting heritage but do not speak of it on the site, not knowing that it makes for interesting reading as well as enhances the brand's credibility. Brand heritage also builds greater familiarity with the brand. If a brand can talk of its past – who started it, how it started and how it evolved over the years then consumers get a sense of the brand's history and a more appreciative perspective of the brand. Many consumers in Asia do not know that Thomas Alva Edison was one of the founders of GE or that Carrier is the company that invented air conditioners – information that adds to these brands' stature.
- l) *Give out interesting news about the brand:* Brand extensions, forthcoming events, celebrities coming on board need to be up on the site. While it may seem obvious that this information should be carried on the website, it is disappointing to see that many big brands do not remember to include this information online until it is stale.
- m) *Who else uses the brand:* Consumers derive great satisfaction in using brands that celebrities use. Often this sense of satisfaction is enhanced if the celebrity is not paid to endorse the brand. Knowing that George Bush uses a Timex can add to the brand appeal or just to the consumer's pride of ownership.

- n) *Give interesting anecdotes about the brand:* Many brands have witnessed interesting incidents that have gone on to become the brand's folklore. Timex has a set of real life tales of the almost death defying resilience of the watch. Stories of how the watch has endured tough circumstances and came out ticking inspire awe for the brand. Brand custodians should use the brand website to communicate interesting brand tales to their prospects/consumers.
- o) *Put photographs of people:* The presence of photographs speaks a lot of the credibility and friendliness of a brand. Photographs of the company headquarters and some key people add to the interest value of the site. The picture of the tea taster of a tea brand or the programmer behind a complex software brand makes for interesting viewing and costs next to nothing to put up.
- p) *Database creation:* A common fault many big brands commit is asking site visitors for email ids without having a definite plan of how to use these in the near future. Often brands do not want to miss out on collecting email ids of visitors to their site, but do not realize that site visitors who give their email id normally do so expecting something in return albeit a simple newsletter. Not receiving anything in return for giving the brand permission to intrude into their life can cause rancor. Asking for email ids only makes sense if the brand has a ready plan of what to do with these ids in the near future.
- q) *Ask for suggestions and reward them:* Asking for suggestions is a sign of showing that the brand is not bigger than its well wishers. A 'suggestions' section provides an interactive component to the website and can be of great value with the insights and advice that it elicits. Good suggestions can be rewarded with a simple gift and all suggestions should be rewarded with a mail thanking the contributor for the suggestion.
- r) *Ask for feedback and set deadlines for response:* The feedback section of most sites is often the section that causes the most frustration with feedback either not responded to in a timely manner or just plain ignored. Unanswered complaints/queries can cause enormous irritation. This can be prevented through a simple line that states the time frame by which the brand's representative will reply. Creating a system of accountability for response to mails within the stipulated deadlines should not be too difficult for any brand.
- s) *Careers etiquette:* Brands that have a careers section need to be discreet in the way they handle this section. People responding to the careers section can feel slighted if they do not receive any response for a while or ever. Auto response through bots is not a great way of providing response either. Applicants can be touchy and getting an dehumanized auto response can rub them the wrong way. It is important to be sure before setting up this section whether the HR department has the interest and energy to handle online applications or not.

- t) *Allow business associates to contact you:* A good website offers something for all its audiences. Giving prospective business associates an opportunity to communicate with the brand makes for common sense marketing. Similarly a section that provides information/contact details for investors/media people is a part of every well thought out website.

The extent of information that the site can provide knows no boundaries. Many visitors of brand websites are seekers of information. It is only fitting that the brand ensures that they are not disappointed in this regard. The perspective towards information should be that as much relevant non-confidential information that can be provided should be available to interested site visitors. If the visitor is willing to search for it then the brand should be willing to provide it. If the information is too micro-detailed then of course the visitor should be asked to send an email asking for the information.

Testing the website is critical to the success of the website in achieving the brand objectives set for it. Five critical tests help in understanding how well the site functions.

- a. *Testing for speed:* A site catering to international audiences needs to take into consideration the varying bandwidth levels prevailing across countries and see that the site speed is acceptable to a majority of its visitors.
- b. *Testing for browser compatibility:* Visitors can use different browsers and so ensuring that the site can be accessed through all the main browsers is important.
- c. *Testing for brand experience:* It is important to understand the nature of the brand experience site visitors get when visiting the site. Matching the site experience with the desired site experience gives critical pointers for modifying the site.
- d. *Testing the communication of intent:* Studying whether the site is communicating the brand's intent is important as intent is a critical aspect in influencing consumer trust. Websites by virtue of their ability to communicate enormous amounts of information at a low cost are in a very good position to communicate brand intent. Knowing whether the site is fulfilling this objective is critical.
- e. *Testing the communication of values:* The key differentiators between brands are the values that these brands stand for. The values that a brand stands for form the basis of the relationship that the brand has with its consumers. The brand's website needs to communicate these values unequivocally and gauging consumer response to the website on the parameter of values communication is an important aspect of understanding whether the website will work for the brand.

Setting up a good website is only half the task. Poor maintenance, non-working links, grammatical mistakes, irregular updates, non-responses to consumer mails are but some of the many faux pas that several big brands are guilty of. Proper delineation of responsibility amongst the team responsible for the site, attention to detail and commitment to meeting deadlines to issues such as site updates, response to mails etc are the important facets of making a brand's website work for the brand.

The decision to set up a website for a brand is a strategic decision and requires commitment and attention to make the effort successful. Like any other strategic initiative – the website requires adequate management time and resources to yield the requisite benefits. A website backed by insufficient resources could be counterproductive to the brand. As the saying goes 'The bigger the weapon the more dangerous it is when it backfires'.

**About the author:** Kartikeya Kompella is the Chennai business head for one of India's leading DM Agencies. He has over 10 years of experience in the fields of brand consulting, advertising, online marketing and relationship marketing. He can be contacted at [kompela@vsnl.com](mailto:kompela@vsnl.com).