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“There is just no way any management with any intelligence and foresight cannot recognize the value of a corporate image. It is the best, single marketable investment that a company can make.” – Malcolm Forbes



WHAT IS CORPORATE IMAGE?

Corporate image is the outward expression of everything a corporate brand stands for. Its component parts – logo, color scheme, typographic scheme, layout parameters, photographic and illustration style, message strategy, copy tone and personality – all fit together to communicate the value attributes that differentiate the promise the brand makes. So it's no wonder Malcolm Forbes was so vehement about its value. For without a properly developed brand image, every message a corporation sends is inherently less effective than it should be, and can even damage the brand.



CLIENT: Integrated Electrical Services

DESCRIPTION: The largest electrical contractor in America

ASSIGNMENT: Corporate Identity and Brand Architecture Program

DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson

AGENCY: Loucks & Johnson

THE GOAL OF A BRAND IMAGE PROGRAM

Every offer is built on some driving vision, some unique promise of value. The brand image must differentiate that promise from all other offers, and it must do so in a manner that connects management's intentions with the needs and desires of the market.

From a functional standpoint, brands have three parts: **Behavior, expression and experience.** Behavior is what an organization does in support of its core purpose. The professionalism and good cheer of Starbucks' baristas, for example, is an aspect of brand behavior. The fact that you can return any tool to Sears for a refund or exchange, no matter how long you've used it, with no questions asked, is another example of brand behavior. Both of these organizations have gone to great

lengths to express to all their constituents how these behaviors (and the others that comprise their respective brands) support the underlying value promises that differentiate them. The result is that over many years, the public consistently experiences these brands as true to the promises they make.



THE COMPETITIVE MANDATE



The average American is exposed to over 5,000 brand messages every day. Add the fact that every customer has the ability to turn you off, tune you out, or simply hit delete. In an environment like this, it takes more than just yelling louder or selling cheaper. It takes a commitment to consistent, compelling brand expression to rise above the noise and maintain a desired position in the minds of your tribe.

So a corporate image must accurately communicate, on an intellectual and an emotional level, everything a brand stands for, and do so in a way that will endure cultural evolution, economic flux and competitive pressure. When it can do this effectively, it can seize a position above the noise.

INVESTING IN CORPORATE IMAGE

In spite of the importance of a corporate image, on a relative basis, the cost is surprisingly low. Generally speaking, the design phase of a comprehensive corporate identity program runs from a few thousand dollars for a small organization to perhaps a few million for a major corporation. Design costs usually include the strategic briefing, market research and client interaction, in addition to the creative development and production work that

goes into delivering the final product. The cost of designing a brand image can be far less than the cost of a single ad, less than a single employee's salary, less than the CEO's bonus. Yet one of the most commonly cited reasons for not investing in corporate image is cost.



CLIENT: Steverson

DESCRIPTION: An Independent Staffing Firm

ASSIGNMENT: Corporate Identity Program

DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson

AGENCY: Loucks & Johnson



CORPORATE IMAGE APPLICATIONS

Every organization has a set of operational applications, such as business stationery, trade dress, presentation materials, and other expressions. They also have their promotional materials, such as web sites, advertising, print collateral and the like. The list can be long, of course, but the important thing to note is no matter how many applications an organization needs for its communication, the cost of producing them within the context of a well-managed design program is no more than the cost of producing them without one. In fact, a design program may actually reduce the cost of producing deliverables, because it creates economies of scale in printing, fabrication of signage and graphics, production of audiovisual messaging and other support work.



CLIENT: Dream Management
DESCRIPTION: Property Management Firm
ASSIGNMENT: Corporate Identity and Stationery Design
DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson
AGENCY: Brandwave



LAUNCHING A NEW CORPORATE IMAGE

The launch of a new identity program for an existing organization is a somewhat different matter. Decisions about introducing new materials are made in light of the cost of disposing of legacy materials, such as stationery and brochures. There is always a desire to save materials that have already been paid for, but like every other business decision, a simple cost/benefit analysis can guide management to a sound decision. That being said, many companies hang on to legacy materials till then run out, even though they cost relatively little to produce. But when stakeholders see two different images being expressed through various media, they become confused. They make up their own stories about what is happening to the brand, and they become vulnerable to predatory and opportunistic competition.

Whether a corporation chooses a gradual transition to a new identity or (ideally) a spectacular “unveiling,” a well-planned launch campaign helps manage the costs of roll-out and minimizes the confusion that can occur in transition. More importantly, a new corporate image is an opportunity to connect with stakeholders and reinforce not only the brand promise, but why it’s relevant, how it’s being improved and what the public can expect from the brand in the future.



CLIENT: USA Cafe
DESCRIPTION: “Eater-tainment” Venue
in Fort Worth, Texas
ASSIGNMENT: Applied Identity, Identity
Launch Program, Site Design and Graphics,
Advertising
DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson
AGENCY: Loucks & Johnson

THE PAYOFF

Investing in corporate image at start-up, or in the makeover of an existing image, can pay off in a big way. Customers are brought closer to the core value promise through more exciting, more meaningful brand expression. Buzz about the change attracts more people to the tribe. Employees, customers, investors, partners and influencers are energized and can begin to coalesce around your brand promise in a new and powerful way. The risk of confusion with other brands is minimized.

Aside from the impact on brand awareness and loyalty, however, there are very real benefits in terms of cash savings. Lost opportunity cost associated with weak messaging is recouped. Hard costs connected to production of deliverables can be reduced.



CLIENT: The Council On Alcohol and Drugs Houston

DESCRIPTION: One of Houston's Most Successful Non-profit Organizations

ASSIGNMENT: Corporate Identity Program, Annual Reports, Advertising

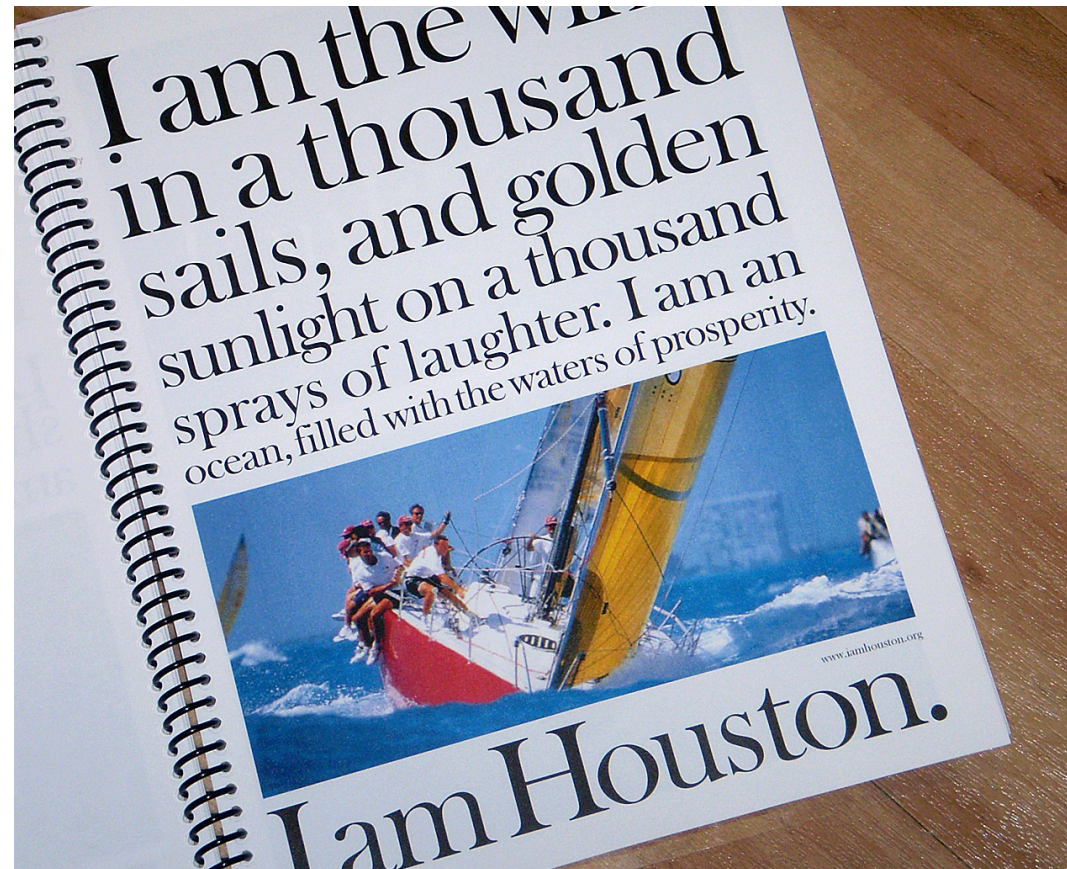
DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson

AGENCY: Loucks & Johnson, Brandwave



PROTECTING THE BRAND

In addition, a consistently managed corporate identity program makes it easier to defend your intellectual property. You may find yourself in court someday, prosecuting a trademark infringement. If your identity program is inconsistent, if your logo files are not tightly managed, if your adjunct typography, color schemes or taglines vary from application to application, it may be hard to convince a judge your identity is really yours. So a proper corporate identity program (which includes trademark registration and copyright applications as appropriate) ensures the intellectual property that expresses your brand promise is legally protected.



CLIENT: The City of Houston
ASSIGNMENT: A Major Government Branding Initiative
DESIGNER: Timothy Johnson
AGENCY: Loucks & Johnson



THE BOTTOM LINE

Corporate image design streamlines and amplifies your message, creates excitement, energizes your stakeholders and reduces your costs. It also provides you with legal protection if you come under attack from competitors. So consider carefully the value you place on the promise you make to your market, and use design to make your brand your most valuable asset.



Tim Johnson is an award-winning designer, writer and brand strategist with over 25 years experience creating value for organizations of all types and sizes. He was a principal at Loucks & Johnson, and Manager of Brand Development at SessionsGroup. These two firms are among Houston's oldest and most recognized design agencies. He has owned Brandwave since 2003.

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