

# GS Insight

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## What's Your Brand Plan?

A discussion on branding often evokes something akin to the chicken and egg debate. Should the brand define the business, or should the business define the brand? We sometimes get strange looks when answering the question with ... "Yes, both."

From our vantage point, what matters most is that the two are in synch, not which comes first. When a brand and business are in line, the debate is a moot point, because each item will by its very nature define the other. When working in unison, they can be powerful drivers of success.

Sounds simple, right? Not in the real world. Too many companies get sidetracked when they enter the realm of branding. Some see their brand portfolio as merely a "creative execution," not as a key component of their business strategy. Others go to the opposite extreme of thinking that all that is required to help a sagging brand image is to run a special sales promotion. In both cases, a fundamental lack of understanding of the interrelationship between the business and the brand usually leads to unsatisfactory results.

### Grounding Ourselves

According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, the heritage of "brand" dates back to the Middle English words for "torch" and "sword." A look a little further back in time finds that the term is thought to have originated from Old English, meaning to "burn."

These seem like apt descriptions, since the goal of a successful brand is to embed, or burn, a desired image, emotion and expectation about a company, product or service into the minds of the target

audience. This often includes employees, customers, competitors and regulators.

A brand should not be treated as a magical or mystical artifact whose secrets are locked away and held by a "chosen few" in communications. Instead, it should be the common lifeblood of an organization. The brand's most important champions, the business' employees, must all be vested in its success.

Taken in that light, a brand must be continuously nurtured, protected and matured as if the business' health depends on it ... because it does. Given this central role in a business' success, it begs the question, "Does your company treat its brand(s) with the same gusto and executive support as its manufacturing, R&D and sales activities?" The most successful companies almost always answer a resounding "Yes!"

### The Yin and Yang Effect

One way to think about the interdependence between brand and business is the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang. The underlying goal of this philosophy is to try to keep the various aspects in balance. By doing so, they become complementary elements that encourage prosperous and harmonious growth. However, if they get out of balance, things have the potential to spin out of control.

When and where the brand and business become in conflict, the ensuing chaos often manifests itself in terms of lost time, money and opportunity.

While this disconnect is usually avoidable, if a company doesn't pay proper attention to the brand and business relationship, it will often devolve into one of five common dysfunctional situations:



1) **The Wanna-Be Fallacy** typically goes something like this: “I want my brand to be just like Starbucks, Intel or NutraSweet. I want to create that sense of quality you hear when the door of a BMW closes. But, I have a limited budget. I do not have a differentiated product. And, I do not have global distribution.” Here’s the scoop: Household brands are the result of a consistent, disciplined effort. They are not, and can not be, one-time deals. If you want to create the next iconic brand, it takes much more than a desire to be “just like” someone else. It requires a unique angle and a significant commitment of business resources, stamina, support and performance to get there.

2) **The Name Quagmire** is an easy place to get lost. There are a limited number of “unclaimed” names available. Don’t despair. The best approach is to pick a workable option and make the most of it. A brand name should be a) pronounceable, b) translatable, c) non-offensive, and d) workable in your business’ sales channel. After all, the brand will ultimately be what you make of it and the context in which you put it.

3) **Go-Itis** has killed many a promising brand. It is easy to over promise to the market, or your executives, and force a brand to launch too soon. If

you create tremendous brand interest, but have product flaws and manufacturing challenges, the window of opportunity will close quickly and may never open again. Set your launch metrics and stick to them. Think about NASA. A delayed launch or landing is undesirable, but is infinitely better than a rushed one.


4) **Not Living the Brand** is a sad way to diminish your business’ value. “Do as I say, not as I do,” didn’t work when most of us were teenagers, so why should it work now? If a company is not living its brand, the market, competitors, activists and even its own employees will notice. But, if leadership sets the proper tone, it can be a significant boost to sales and morale.

5) **Locked in Stone** happens when a company fails to treat a brand as a living thing. Markets change. Companies change. Customers change. Brand communications must evolve in concert. For example, if the sales force refuses to sell a company’s products in accordance with the brand strategy, the only real choice is to either evolve the brand or get a new sales force.

### Secret to Success

Like many things in life, the “secret” of achieving balance is never losing sight of the basics. Know yourself.

Know your customers. Know your competition. Make your own opportunities. And, deliver, deliver, deliver.

So argue all you want about which comes first ... the business or the brand. Just remember, the most important thing is making sure that the two work in concert, creating a powerful and profitable relationship with the market. 

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