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Q II

APRIL 2007  
U.S. \$3.00  
VOL. 18, NO. 10  
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# Creating brands with Tar Heel staying power

By Christa Miller

**W**hat do a soft-drink company and a nuclear-energy goliath have in common? Very little from a business standpoint, but a great deal from a branding perspective. Aside from the obvious — that Pepsi and General Electric Co. (GE) both have mega-marketing budgets at their disposals — these companies understand that brand longevity requires constant effort.

Branding isn't a game of survival. One first must survive the initial brand establishment phase, of course, but ultimately it is about thrival: Thrive + survival.

How can North Carolina companies emulate the success of these trailblazers? Writing business-savvy objectives for a company's brand with thrival in mind is a good place to start. Here are some additional recommendations for creating a brand that resonates with customers — a century brand that will stand the test of time.

## Creating a century brand

A brand is only as strong and viable as the people who support that brand. Companies are reliant on their people, from top leadership down, to be champions of their brands.

Some brands have more staying power than others, and some have stood the test of time for almost 100 years, making them

century brands. For example, Pepsi has been and will be around for decades to come.

"[Pepsi] is not going anywhere. Someone will be selling Pepsi in 100 years. The brand is that strong," says Jeff Minges, president and CEO of Minges Bottling Group, which has operated a Pepsi bottling franchise in eastern North Carolina for more than seven decades.

But success was not instant and did

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not come easily for the soft-drink brand. The product started slowly in a New Bern pharmacy in 1898, leading to its slogan, "Born in the Carolinas," which was popular throughout the 1980s. It took decades of passionate leaders and committed brand champions to realize Pepsi's full potential.

## Committing to the brand

Starbucks is a classic example of committing to a brand. This Seattle-based company has hip-hopped across the country since its launch. So why do consumers flock there? It's not solely about a caffeine fix, but rather brand experience. It's the aroma, aura, relaxing music and quaint sitting areas that brings customers back.

Not every brand will become a phenomenon of Starbucks' magnitude. But local brands have emulated similar success, including Signal Design Inc., which launched in North Carolina 15 years ago.

The company, which specializes in marketing and creative communications, began in its founder's living room. Today, it maintains offices in Durham and Wilmington and employs a staff of almost 30 people.

The key to the company's success has been embracing its customers and having a little fun in the process, says Rick Haynes, Signal Design's president.

"Our workplace is fun. Our people are fun. Our brand is fun," he says. "Getting clients to choose us is in part due to that atmosphere."

Keeping clients is the most important part of the equation, Haynes admits. "We do that by embracing our customers and by providing them with service, support, and constant reminders that they are the foundation of our business and the key to our success."

## Getting involved

The community surrounding a company's brand is a part of that ultimate foundation. It is an extension of a company's employee base and the place they call home, so it's important to be a part of it.

GE is an example of a company involved with corporate citizenry. It is part of the underlying success of the company's widely recognized and award-winning brand. Fortune Magazine rated General Electric America's Most Admired Company in 2006 for the sixth time in the past decade.

The company's nuclear-energy business, headquartered in Wilmington, also is committed to programs that improve surrounding communities in the Cape Fear



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Valley region.

"We try to maximize our impact by combining executive involvement, volunteerism and financial support to our local educational, cultural, and civic institutions, as well as key environmental programs," says Tom Rumsey, head of public affairs. "It's our way of demonstrating a real and tangible commitment to the community that we live in."

GE Energy's nuclear business also has launched Hands on Wilmington, a project that involves hundreds of volunteer hours engaged in neighborhood-improvement projects.

"As one of Wilmington's largest employers, we have a commitment to this community," Rumsey says. "It's our home, and we're all committed to the area's improvement and ultimate success."

#### Achieving staying power

Even start-ups can create a brand with permanence in mind. Scott Holland, founder of Mediamoves LLC — a start-up venture based in Durham that is focused on nationwide mobile advertising — believes that creating a company with staying power is reliant on establishing a foundational leadership that is committed to the long-term success of its brand.

"Our people all believe in our mission, embrace the quality of our marketing proposition and are all very passionate about the success of Mediamoves," he notes. "Surround your organization with top-quality passionate talent, and ultimately success will come from the inside out."

Pepsi executives share the same philosophy.

While Minges notes the advantages of using marketing dollars to produce savvy marketing campaigns with supermodels, he says the key to the brand's thrival its employees and their commitment to ensuring success.

"Our people are an extension of our family," Minges says. "Without them, there is no production, no distribution, no marketing and no brand. We are reliant upon their talent and their commitment." ○●○

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