

Improve Your Corporate Image

By Alan Bagg

There probably isn't a more nebulous term in business than "corporate image." Is it goodwill? Is it brand equity? Is it reputation?

A quick scan of Books in Print or a check on www.amazon.com will tell you there aren't many books on the topic of corporate image. Maybe it's because the topic is too broad. Yet, we all wrestle with trying to gain a better business image, and I've often stated that building and communicating a congruent corporate image should be the ultimate goal of every successful company. So, if you want to improve your corporate image, start by defining what it is and isn't.

Here is how I define corporate image. What could it mean to your organization or company? A corporate image is the sum of the impressions that stakeholders (like customers, vendors, employees and the public) hold about your company—in other words, your reputation. The ideal corporate image should be managed to become "congruent." When your corporate image is congruent, "what they see is what you are." This is the most authentic position a company can hold. The sum of all impressions we call corporate image is also called a company's "brand equity," created by the process of branding. The result—a more loyal customer base, a more productive work force and more profitability.

Let's dig deeper into the words "congruent corporate image." Obviously we are talking about a corporate image, not a personal one. Like a personal image, you can enhance it but only so much. There has to be some real substance behind the image. Basic character will show through no matter how you massage the surface. By that I mean people will eventually see the truth. Either you showcase it or try to hide it, but eventually your audience will discover what lies behind the exterior image.

That's where congruence comes in. The goal is to show what you are as a company throughout all its facets (not pretend to be something you aren't—as in putting a phony "spin" on your company.)

If your company has strong core values, identify them and communicate them. To whom do you communicate? To everyone who can make a difference, everyone who matters—your stakeholders—like suppliers, customers, employees, etc. These values become the banner your organization flies high; what it stands for.

It has been shown that those companies who manage a strong reputation are those whose customers are more loyal, whose employees are more productive and whose profits are higher than average in their industry.

Where do your stakeholders get their impressions? Well, it's in things like:

- How your employees treat each other and in turn treat your customers or potential customers.
- How does your company deal with your vendors? Are your transactions straightforward, honest or ethical or is it a power struggle? ("We'll beat them down on price just for the fun of it— or because we don't trust them.") Remember, what goes around comes around.

So let's say you want to make sure your corporate image is congruent—truly aligned with what your company is. What if you discover your corporate image doesn't match "reality"? If the impression or image is NOT equal to what the company really is, you have an image or reputation problem. If the performance of the company doesn't match its reputation, it is either performing better than or worse than its reputation (image).

Symptoms of this incongruence may be that sales are falling off, or there are increasing customer complaints about products or service, or employees are becoming disloyal or dissatisfied or are slowing down in productivity or absenteeism is on the increase (Of course there could be lots of other symptoms, but you get the idea.)

If better performance, worse image

If the company is actually performing better than the image held by stakeholders, the company has an image problem, best dealt with by solutions that come from the "branding side" of our business. This organization needs to improve its image primarily by making its true strengths better known to the stakeholders, thus bringing its image into alignment with the performance. The concentration of remedies needs to be from the branding or reputation improvement side of our business. We have many processes we can implement to help in the area of improving image. They generally fall under the four categories you know as marketing, public relations, advertising and sales.

If better image, worse performance

If the company is not measuring up to the perception that stakeholders hold, then it suffers from a "performance issue," best dealt with by creating performance improvement from the peak performance side of our business. This company needs to bring its lack of performance into alignment with an elevated reputation. To determine the proper course of action to take in bringing the two areas into alignment or congruence, look at the situation through your customers or stakeholders' vantage point.

Why choose to concentrate on one area over the other?

At Corporate Images, we believe the problem and its solution can be isolated into two generalized areas: branding and peak performance. These two areas alone represent the most potent means to remedy the problem and bring about Better Business Results. These two areas need to be in balance throughout the company or enterprise. By concentrating efforts in the primary category that needs alignment, it will bring about the proper re-alignment so the whole company improves. If companies try to improve in both areas by focusing on both simultaneously, there really is no focus at all. Focus means pinpointing the area of most need and directing energy and resources to it until it positively affects Better Business Results.

Encourage a Take-Charge Attitude for Better

Serving the public isn't easy—especially when the public is ticked off. But you can motivate customer service reps by following this simple guideline: Empower them to resolve the problems that come their way. Many companies make customer service reps get a supervisor's okay before they, say, issue a credit for damaged merchandise, or send out a gift certificate to compensate for inadequate service. But studies show workers resent being forced to hand off a problem just when it becomes challenging. Those who are free to resolve complaints themselves are more likely to take complaints—and their jobs—seriously.

If you think your corporate image could use some re-alignment, call me at 262.633.7772 or email: abagg@corporate-images.com

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—Adapted from
“Customer service is getting worse,”
by Rebecca Ganzel, in Training