

18 THE BRAND IS YOU

'There's only one word that is banned in our company: brand. We are only as good as our latest product. I don't believe in brand at all.'

James Dyson

There's a dream that your brand as a B2B provider will make the selling into order taking, with a bit of negotiation thrown in. But relying on brand alone will only get you into the room...

'An ex-McKinsey partner was hired by a start-up B2B services business I worked for in the hope that his profile would release a flood of sales. He never sold a single contract. The "no brand" start-up just wasn't McKinsey (and he, sadly, was no salesman).'

At the higher end of the service food chain – the professional services firms – you buy the people involved in the delivery of the service. They must embody your firm's brand values. Most professional firms use the name of a founder to communicate this fact. But the heritage of the company also matters in terms of the client's perception of the risk. This is why successful individual professionals often find it hard – as the ex-McKinsey partner did – to leverage off their own relationships and get access. As the 'face' of a company with no such legacy, your clients may not assume that your standards automatically apply to others in a firm of lesser pedigree.

A solution can build a reputation, be differentiated and enjoy loyalty and longevity in the market, just as a professional can. Building a story around the history of the solution is part of building that mystique.

‘This solution is currently about 35 per cent of our worldwide revenues and this percentage has continued to grow despite the downturn. There are now more than 40 international customers who have continued to invest in the solution over the last six years. We’re very proud of what they have managed to do with it. It’s delivering for them.’

This sort of solution-brand reputation might even attract new customers’ interest. A well-established, carefully marketed procedure – like laser eye surgery – can attract clients as much as a well-known ophthalmologist or physician.

Does the same thing apply in B2B? Each business situation is unique, but the brand of either your firm or your solution enables you to make a noise in the market and attract attention, even interest. But for someone to actually want to buy your solution, its backstory must be relevant to their ambition. It is the marrying of the capabilities of the solution with outcomes they want to achieve that turns interest into desire. Your brand reputation may give you access, a place on a tendering list, but does not guarantee the sale.

DO NOT ASSUME THEY THINK YOU ARE WORTH ANYTHING

The first lesson when working for a well-known brand is humility. You have been well trained, no doubt, and have many ways to demonstrate your company’s value. The client’s expectations will be high for this reason, but they may also be sceptical. Young professionals and young salespeople can struggle with being credible, no matter what their business card. They do not know as much about business as the client; they have had less experience, less time to make mistakes and acquire a point of view.

Even grey hairs are no guarantee that you will be seen as valuable – although looking a bit older than you are seems to help. The answer is preparation; research and analysis are

substitutes for wisdom. Interesting hypotheses, fresh ideas, a real attempt to understand what is going on in *their* industry, with *their* customers, with *their* competition, with *their* business performance... not only are these interesting, but they show a degree of dedication to the client in advance of the meeting.

Going empty-headed is risky. You will be negatively affecting your company's brand. When you have something interesting to say about the client's business – not just your solution – then, as the salesperson, you feel more confident. This has nothing to do with experience or age. Youth has its own advantages: energy, fresh thinking unfettered by too much experience, a hunger to succeed. Age can reflect on what it has seen elsewhere. Brand means you are on a list, but not the shortlist.

DEVELOP YOUR PERSONAL PROFILE IN LINE WITH YOUR COMPANY'S POSITIONING

Great salespeople are experts in at least two dimensions: their client's industry and its issues; and their solution and its outcomes.

'When I'm describing how the solution will work, I often get a great feeling of power when I can really nail how it is designed to work in their context. You can see clients from the business waiting in judgement to see how the techies have "failed" to understand the real business issues. You can see the technical people in the audience waiting to catch you out on some detail. If you can avoid both these pitfalls and demonstrate that this not only will work but will transform the way that the customer works for ever, you win. The test of your mastery of both technology and context is the way you show you understand change...'

What is your individual USP? Where are your areas of expertise that differentiate you from the other salespeople your client talks to? With time, it helps to develop your own image within your company and also within the market, based on your interests and career experience. Internally, you can do this by setting

up online communities or chat rooms of people with similar interests, or by arranging for meetings on topics that interest you. Externally, you can do this by blogging, talking at conferences, possibly with PR. If the client sees you as somebody with an area of independent specialist expertise in addition to your role as a salesperson, they may listen differently to you. You are still a chameleon, but one with a preferred colour.

Obviously, this needs to be thought through in terms of the impact on the client's perception of your brand. Developing your profile as a crazy boffin works if your company's positioning is leading-edge technology, but not if your brand image is sober reliability. If you are reading this as a person who started out as the specialist or line manager and have moved into sales, you will recognize the importance of this individual profiling as a client; salespeople who cannot add value in person are just a waste of your time. The sooner they show you the product the better.

Your aim is to make sure that they are glad that they chose your company to talk with, rather than the competition – and to make yourself memorable.

BRAND MAY AFFECT THEIR PERCEPTION OF PRICE

A no-brand offer is often expected to be cheaper than one from an established company. Most professional firms take at least seven years to build a positive reputation so, if you are just starting out, you may need to emphasize other things in your personal history which suggest that the client will be getting a great deal if they work with your company: your colleagues' track records with several blue-chip firms and/or technical expertise out of the lab of a top university. You can also emphasize the way in which the solution has been developed and tested – suggesting not only a rigorous but also lengthy process of investment.

A well-known brand will, however, have less difficulty justifying its fees. Professional services firms provide some ideas here, too, as a salesman who works a lot in this sector told me:

‘McKinsey want people who can contribute to clients’ business and who have impact. They don’t like the terminology associated with selling, preferring more neutral terms like “partnering”. When young principals [the career stage before being given a business development role] are being tested for partner potential, they give them a budget for a specific client and then, after 9–12 months, go and ask the clients they have been “contributing” to to assess the benefit they have brought. If these outcomes are in line with McKinsey’s (very high) fee rates, then they consider the person seriously for the partnership.’

This is really ensuring that your brand is worth the premium price, but the principle seems to be correct. Assessing value after the solution has been installed is about not just how far it ‘did what it said on the tin’, but also about assessing the ultimate value of the outcomes delivered. What if your client got this wrong? Your solution could deliver and yet the value perception might be less than expected. A brand worth the premium not only tracks benefits but has a point of view about the value of those benefits during the sales process.

Putting it all together

Brand is important because it creates expectations and interest and can be a substitute for client experience. Because information about your performance as a company is more readily available, a well-known brand now guarantees less in terms of an easier time in the sales funnel than it did. ‘You are really only as good as your last job’, as one salesperson suggested, paraphrasing the Hollywood cliché. That being said, if you profile yourself carefully as a specialist and develop a point of view about how your solutions best deliver value, your clients may expect to pay a bit more for your service than for your competitors’.