



What's in a name?

Your **BRAND** is you

ARE YOU A WAL-MART or a Tiffany's? A strong brand identity can help close sales with the kind of clients you want.

Ken Wong, associate dean of the Queen's School of Business, holds up a small object: the remote control for his laptop. He asks the seminar audience to tell him everything they know about it. Answers are called out from around the room. "It is black."

"It looks like it is made of plastic."

"It is electronic."

"It has buttons."

"Good," Wong says, "now what if I told you it was made by this company." The Fisher-Price logo appears on the screen.

More answers ring out: "It is durable."

"It is easy to use."

"It is inexpensive."

Next, Wong points out, "Everyone here could tell me those things about this device the moment they saw that logo. How long do you think it would take a salesman to convince a customer this device had those properties? And how long does a salesman usually have with a customer?"

Wong's example illustrates the power of brands. By building a brand, a company can create an instant impression about itself and its product in the mind of a customer. These impressions take the form of subliminal assumptions the customer adopts without question, leaving your sales force free to focus on its

proper role of fulfilling demand rather than creating it. According to Wong, many marketers struggle under the myth that marketing programs exist only to drive sales volumes up. In fact, motivating potential customers to buy is only one of several objectives a marketing program can have. Effective branding lifts every part of your business by bringing customers to the door who already want what you have to offer. It narrows your exposure to competition by defining and differentiating your offering. It can enhance your perceived value and widen your margins, or communicate your low prices and expand your market share. It creates a strong, emotional association between you and your target audience that brings you to mind when they are ready to buy and helps them remember you for referrals and repeat business.

IN THE FLOORING INDUSTRY, suppliers work hard and spend millions to build big, impressive brand identities. The strategy of many retailers is to piggyback on those efforts, telling customers they have Brand X and hoping this is enough to lure them to their stores. This approach has the advantage of being inexpensive, but does nothing to tell customers why they should be buying Brand X from you and not someone else. Even if you have the exclusive rights to a product brand in your area, there is always the risk a store with a stronger retail brand will entice customers to visit and look at alternatives to your flagship product. Then there is the risk your supplier's brand will go away, or be taken in some direction that does not work in your market. The only brand you own and control is your own, and investment in your brand is investment in your business.

r reputation

Tony Shay, an industry consultant, gave the following example in a seminar on relationship selling at Surfaces last January. “There was an old family hardware store near where I live that went out of business recently,” he said. “I spoke to the owner shortly before he closed up. He said ‘Tony, I do not understand why I’m not getting more business. Everyone who comes into the store tells me they can always find what they want here when they cannot find it anywhere else.’ I said, ‘That is your problem. You are the last place they look.’” Shay’s friend had a great selection of all the best products, and was well-known in his market, but customers did not shop there until they had tried and failed somewhere else. He had not done the work on his own brand to make it a top-of-mind, attractive choice for local people looking for hardware.

Shay recommends looking for creative ways to make a visit to your showroom a unique experience, something he says is especially important to women. “Flooring products are made with nasty chemicals and the adhesives and finishes are powerful chemicals, as well,” he says. “So what do you think your showroom smells like?” Shay remembers one company he worked with that rented a small, countertop oven on weekends and baked cookies in the showroom for visitors. It smelled great, the cookies tasted great and the whole environment of the showroom was transformed. He says such little details as playing the right music (light jazz, because it is the least disliked in surveys) and using a more expensive pen to sign contracts add up to create an overall brand image in the customer’s mind.

When you think of companies with strong brands, you notice a great deal of regularity in how they pres-

ent themselves to the public: the same colours, the same words and phrases, the same images and logos. Individually, these look like nitpicking details doing nothing for the bottom line. Collectively, they send the constant message to the customer that he is dealing with a professional organization from which he can expect consistent delivery of a certain value proposition. Tom Gormley, president of Avant Guard Flooring, understands that detailed consistency in how you present your brand is of critical importance. He recently invested heavily in research and development, but realized his investment would go to waste if the upgrades were not effectively communicated with a fresh brand position. An idea of how to do that came to him out of his own shopping experience. “I was buying a washer and dryer at Future Shop,” he says, “and they had

these interactive screens where you could select the product and ask for the details you wanted. I said ‘This is great, why aren’t we doing this?’” Avant Guard’s new displays will include video screens running presentations about its products. “We created videos to train and inform,” Gormley says. “The salesman can use these to help him discuss the product with customers. We do not have to worry about our message getting watered down. Everything is geared toward the brand.”

A strong brand image in your showroom only works on customers who are already in it. Creating an attractive brand that will draw the right kinds of customers to your door is a matter of promotion, and that means advertising. Yet advertising from our industry seems to follow one strategy: tell them what you have, tell them it is great and tell them your prices cannot be beat. It is a good approach, except when dozens of other companies are out there saying the same thing.

BRAND-BUILDING ADVERTISING can cut through the clutter of messages about beautiful flooring at low prices and differentiate your business, giving customers a reason to approach you on their own and ask about your product and prices. Interfaceflor’s branding strategy is a strong example. In 1994, Ray Anderson, the c.e.o., made a risky and expensive decision to re-brand his huge carpet tile company as a leader in green industrial practices. The move is portrayed by Anderson and the company as a principled decision based on a desire to save the planet. Be that as it may, the effect has been a tremendous re-energizing of the Interfaceflor brand. Its ongoing narrative about its journey toward ever-greener practices captures the attention of everyone interested in such things, both in and out of the flooring industry. It is hard to imagine an architect conceiving of a green building project and not at least considering Interfaceflor. But the high profile and buzz the move generated has lifted the company’s profile even with those unconcerned with green issues. It is important to note that other companies attempting to follow Interfaceflor’s green messaging have



not achieved the same benefit in terms of market perception. The whole idea of branding is to make your company unique in the eyes of consumers. Taking a “me, too” approach fails before it even begins.

A walk around the show floor at Surfaces yielded several examples of companies moving off a straight quality and pricing message to try to give customers a broader feel for what they offer. Tarkett’s booth featured floor-level video screens showing adults, children and pets walking and playing on its floors. The footage looked like something that might be captured if you just left a camera running on the floor in a typical household. No specific message was included, but there was a strong impression of home and family, convincingly connecting Tarkett to the idea of residential living. BR-111, a Brazilian exotic hardwood exporter, communicated rather a different message by eschewing a booth altogether in favour of a large, swanky party at a nearby Vegas nightclub. Then there was British Wool, a venture by the U.K. wool marketing board, who sought to rebrand wool as an environmentally friendly carpet material by showing an earnest video message from Prince Charles. None of these organizations was simply seeking to maximize its exposure and sales volume. In-

stead, they were carving out a niche for themselves by sending strong messages to the marketplace about who they are. A retailer viewing all three messages will know exactly whom to approach depending on whether he is looking for residential resilient for single-family homes, stylish hardwood for an upscale hotel or green carpet to satisfy LEED requirements in a public building.

BRANDING IS ASSOCIATED with retail sales in the minds of most people, but there is no reason why business-to-business enterprises and tradesmen cannot benefit from a strong brand identity. Branding efforts by installers are usually restricted to picking a company name and relying on word-of-mouth promotion about the quality of their work. Compare the approach of ISO Installation Services, an installation-service provider based in Calgary, Alta., with 10 branches across the West and Ontario. “We needed to drive a brand people can relate to,” explains Mike Clements, president and c.o.o. “So we sat with a really smart marketing lady and thought about our company, what we wanted to happen in the future and how we could communicate that graphically and verbally. Our mantra is ‘Centrally managed and locally executed,’ so our icon is four balls orbiting around one. The central ball is our head office in Calgary with human resources management and process management supported centrally. Not many flooring companies have an HR manager, I’ll tell you that.

VIRTUALLY ELIMINATES LIPPAGE



ON FLOORS



ON WALLS

- Level floor surface with leveling compound.
- Put and align tiles.
- Grout the joints and grout the tiles.
- After installation, remove leveling compound.



Tuscan Leveling System

2-plane system that virtually eliminates lippage during tile installation.

Coverings
Visit Us:
BOOTH #2339

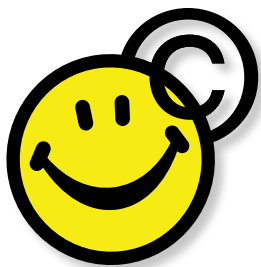
Advantages and benefits:
 - Access standard industrial (1000) full-sized equipment used.
 - May apply to floor and use of grout bed.
 - Prevents tile from cracking with traffic.
 - More profitable for the installer.

Advantages:
 - Recommended for joints 1/2" or larger.
 - Reduces lippage and grout loss.
 - Quickly grout joints, do further assembly before tile used for grouting and setting.
 - See the website for more information.



PEARL ABRASIVE CO.
 SINCE 1914

800-960-9621 (U.S.) • 604-662-6666 (Canada) • WWW.PEARLABRASIVE.COM



customer. Those outside balls are really our branches connected to head office with a proprietary order-man-

agement system.” ISO is using its logo as a communication tool to remind people about its distinctive market offering: a particular organizational structure. But even having a logo and a consistent, specific message about the company tells potential clients they looking at a professional organization with the resources to stand behind its work. As with Wong’s example above, the brand instantly and subliminally gives customers an im-

pression of the company that removes a key sales objection before it has ever been raised.

Clements illustrates another power of branding when he talks about some of the other connotations rising out of his logo. “When we launched the brand we wanted to say we follow a four-ball strategy,” he says. “Some people call it a four-block strategy, we call it a four-ball strategy. Each ball signifies a cornerstone of our business. One is people. Customer experience is second. Another is growing profitably, and the fourth is productivity. Those four balls come into how we manage our performance objectives for the company. Under people, for instance, it is really important to us to be the preferred workplace and drive ISO ambassadorship in the market.” The brand defines the company to itself, giving everyone inside it a gut feeling for how it approaches the market and how it conducts business. The company’s marketing objectives become integrated into everything the company does, keeping staff focused on the final objective of achieving success and making money.

ONE OF THE TRICKY ASPECTS of branding is it only works if it is true. Brand messages that conflict with customer experience quickly become toxic, standing for the opposite of what is intended. Toyota had one of the strongest reputations for quality attached to its brand name. Now, because of high-profile customer experiences with bad quality, the name will be associated with faulty gas pedals, steering and other issues for some time. It is likely that Toyota’s long history of living up to its brand promise will reassert itself in the marketplace and the brand will eventually return to its old status, but the company will lose a lot of sales between now and then. Articulating an effective company brand takes a measure of honest introspection comparable to psychotherapy. Building it into a market leader takes constant care, investment and commitment to best practices. ●

Smart Shine™
Hardwood and Laminate Floor Recoating System

A Revolutionary Hardwood and Laminate Floor Recoating System*
NO SANDING REQUIRED
*For best results use our Woodpecker™ Floor Care Applicator

Wood pecker™ Floor Care Kit Woodpecker™ Floor Care Applicator

Please watch our short instructional video at www.namac.com

Woodpecker™ Advantage PLUS
Hardwood and Laminate Floor Care System

For "Streak Free" cleaning of all Hardwood and Laminate Floors
Keeps floors sparkling clean
Exclusively available in Floor Covering Stores
FREE Merchandising & Display Program!!

Tel: 800-357-7181 Fax: 800-508-5333
Web: www.namac.com E-mail: info@namac.com

NAMAC the wood floor care people.