

Emerging in an emerging market

Creating context, connection, and meaning for your innovation through brand-building.

By Roger Sametz and Eric Norman

“If we build it, they will come,” an aphorism that could have been coined in the halls of MIT in those heady days when Route 128 was a lot more than the connecting link between two bits of I-95, is now more appropriate in its opposite configuration: “It’s not enough just to build it.” Stellar thinking alone may not be enough to get “them....to come.”

New technologies and their applications are often less successful than they might be (and the people and companies behind them less successful than they want to be) because the people behind the innovations thought a great idea would sell itself.

Often, new ideas don’t automatically have an obvious natural constituency; many don’t have an obvious need that is waiting to be filled. Both the need and the constituency need to be created. For example, there was a time when no one needed (or knew they needed) a CRM system, IP telephony, or the ability to carry around 2500 “albums” on their person—without benefit of liner notes.

The challenge for many new technology products and services is to *define new mental models* for what is possible, practical, and desirable, and then, ideally, stake out a leadership position to “own” this new model.

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Innovators have the opportunity to not only devise and launch a new product, but also set the terms for dialogue about it—and define the space for products that follow (and even those that have come before)—if they think about the *meaning* and *prospective brand* of their innovation along with how it works. How will a new technology, or its application, change the way customers do and think about things?

Ideally, a new product or service, the behaviors or possibilities it supports or engenders, its meaning in the market or culture—and the people for whom all of this is valuable—are seamlessly connected. Brand building can help to both clarify thinking internally and provide the “glue” externally.

The iPod now defines what portable, digital music means; there were predecessor technologies, products, needs, and behaviors, but they came together in this breakthrough product supported by such strong branding that it has

completely defined the terms of dialogue in its market.

Even from the beginning of a new technology, its future brand—the signals of its properties, position, and potential meaning and value in the marketplace—should be considered and researched: What does the competition look like? What are the attributes the market evaluates? What are the current and possible positions you can “own”? Is this innovation going to set a new standard in an existing category or will it be so different that you’ll have to take on the job of defining and promoting a new category along with your launch?

A note on brand relationships

New entrepreneurs often make the mistake of defining (and naming) their first product identically to their organization. This strategy (or lack of one) can paint an organization into a corner and make it hard to introduce new products that don't share the same value proposition or serve the same markets. Thinking about creating an organizational brand that can "sit over" early products is important, even if there are not the time, resources, or immediate need to promulgate this higher-level brand. Similarly, launching a new product under an existing corporate brand that has a meaning very different from what the new offering needs to have can be a problem—and often calls for the creation of a new brand. Understanding when to connect a new offering's brand closely to the parent brand is also important. Sony introduced its Walkman as *Sony Walkman*—not as a standalone brand. Its success substantially burnished the Sony brand and elevated its image as an innovator.

Moving from strategy to tactics

+ Identify your prospective constituents: customers (and often their customers), investors, influencers, and related decisionmakers;

+ Define the needs and opportunities waiting to be met—and the user experience that will make meeting these needs even more satisfying;

+ Clearly articulate the product's /service's value propositions: What's the big message? What's the "tilt" of that message for each constituency?

+ Evaluate different branding strategies: should this innovation be launched on its own or be seen as an offering within a larger family?

+ Evaluate names, and naming strategies: there are different advantages and constraints to literal, and to more evocative names. How can a tagline add meaning and connection and work in tandem with the name?

+ If your offering will be a stand-alone brand, evolve a visual and verbal voice: choice of language, type, color, and imagery can send strong messages in both your communications and in the design and presentation of the innovation itself. (The iPod would not be the same creature if it had a wood-grained vinyl skin.)

+ Plan how you're going to get the word out; what are the channels that match how important constituencies want to receive communication: PR and editorial coverage, advertising, print and electronic initiatives, participation in trade shows or conferences, seeding buzz marketing.

+ Understand that how your organization "behaves" can either reinforce or erode the image and meaning that you're trying to propagate.

Thinking beyond the widget

Creating or entering a new market is a great business opportunity that can be powerfully leveraged by thoughtfully-planned strategic branding and communications. Done well, you can successfully pair your business or product with a new need, establish a commanding competitive position, define the terms of dialogue, and leverage this position going forward to gain customer, investor, and press interest for subsequent offerings.

Strongly pairing what you want your brand to mean to you and your enterprise will help you to connect to people on a level beyond what a new technology does—to how it changes how people work, live, and understand the world.

All of which does not now mean: "if we brand it, they will come." But investing in the branding of new technological products and services will certainly add to the value of your innovative thinking.

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About Sametz Blackstone Associates

Sametz Blackstone Associates, founded in 1979, is a Boston-based, brand-focused strategic communications practice that helps leading academic, cultural, corporate, professional service, and government organizations to better navigate change.

Sametz Blackstone Associates

Compelling communications—integrating brand-focused strategy, design, and technology to help evolving organizations navigate change

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