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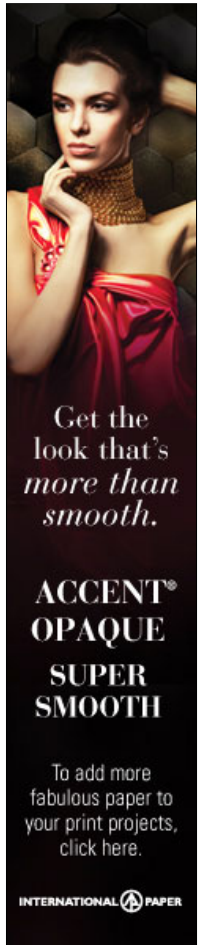
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The Importance of Branding Your Own Agency

Guest Post by David Moritz
President/Founder, Viceroy Creative

Creative agencies as a group are notorious for not tending their own branding and marketing garden as zealously as they do for their clients. It would be fairly ironic to launch into a dissertation on why these activities are important, as the very agencies I would be speaking to (my own included) will be routinely making that exact same case to their clients and prospective clients! We all know the pitch; we make it almost daily. It's good, essential even, everyone needs it – then by and large why don't we do it? Let's explore a few reasons, refute them, and see if we can convince ourselves to make a sustained internal marketing effort.

My own agency recently went through a successful and intense rebranding, repositioning and marketing effort where for the better part of a year we treated our own internal project in as serious, sustained, and regimented a process as we would a client project.

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We spent a lot of money, we were very nervous, we worked very hard – but surprise, the tactics and effort that we regularly sell to our clients worked like a charm for ourselves when we applied them full heartedly. I think we've all experienced the difference when these efforts are applied half-heartedly or outside of process and have lackluster results. Now the challenge is on us to keep it up, and that's just as difficult. That said, on with the exploration.

Reason number one agencies don't do branding well for themselves: Many are already famous or known by most of their market. This is a real issue to contend with! Maybe almost everyone in the world has already heard of your giant firm, or your sexy boutique's phone is ringing off the hook, or you serve a very closely guarded industry and everyone within that industry already knows and likes you. If things are already going well, why expend money and effort on image and marketing?

While this may be a real cause to stall on the internal branding initiatives, if it were sound logic then we would never see another job from widely recognized client brands. Things may be good now, but as we all know proper branding can be a capital investment in future business. That is how every luxury business views most of their marketing efforts: as trees to be planted for future harvests. The good work that you continue to do for clients is not the same as the marketing and image building of your agency. Continuous maintenance of that work is just as necessary for an agency's longevity as it is for a fashion brand to properly showcase its great products and brand experience.

The branding can always be better, and it will always get stale and need to be updated, no matter how well known and liked the agency is — especially if growth is desired. Even if we all agree about this, there are more practical and pressing reasons why we do not get up and do it. **The two main reasons are some of the basic issues that need to be first addressed with a client brief: Budget and focus.**

Even if services will be mostly done in house, the internal project must have a set budget and it must be ample enough to accomplish the objective. Material things and resources always need to be purchased. This may give pause as agencies may be used to working with their clients' relatively larger budgets. It may be difficult to imagine spending anywhere near to what a consumer brand must spend, or can spend, and it may be a difficult hurdle to imagine moving the needle with what an agency could afford to spend on itself. Regardless of the size and its imagined efficacy, there must first be a budget – this is unavoidable.

The second obstacle is that to be successful an initiative must have a focus, and agencies often do not want to feel like they are limiting themselves. The process of branding is one of pruning and prioritizing, but an agency can be many things to many clients. How can there be a strong brand image that is useful for focused marketing when doing so may limit the type of clients or projects walking in the door?

Both obstacles, budget and the worry of limitation, are logical fallacies because agencies can handle this and do it for their clients every day. Set long term and short term goals, keep them limited and ambitious but achievable. Look at brand equity and ROI, make sure both are considered, and then set a budget against that. It is a good exercise to truly be in your client's shoes. Decide what you can risk, what you can spend and what you hope to make back or get out of it. We have all worked with small budgets and leveraged available resources before – agencies can do that in this case for themselves. Make a plan to do what you can and decide what you will risk, execute it diligently like any other project, get the results back and see how you did. Just like your clients do!

As for the branding itself and the narrowing of focus necessary to do it successfully, this is probably an

imaginary risk. Most agencies already have an identity and get certain kinds of projects. In my own agency we are often surprised that with our new edgier image we are getting calls from clients in categories that one might expect to want to stay within traditional category cues. But we also have a message about business objectives and clearly some clients want to shake things up in their category (of course we get the typical spirits and luxury as well, more now than before). Clients will see something they want and the relationship will be better when the agency image is clearer. After all, a diamond is only worth its true potential after a way has been found to sacrifice so much good value diamond material to make the finished cut and polished product. Some gem material must be cut away to realize the full potential of the stone. Agencies do not want to feel like they are risking leaving jobs on the table by limiting themselves too much. Yet at the same time, we would not recommend to a client that they try to sell every conceivable object (Amazon! hush, clearly I mean brand name manufacturers), nor even every object within their aesthetic range. Working with clients, we have to bring out the scalpel together and decide what stays in the forefront and feel that pain of cutting out good points in favor of better ones. Agencies should perform this act with the same gusto and confidence on their own brands.

These are some of the reasons why branding is not a higher priority for agencies. Spend money and make choices. Easy to do for a client, hard to do for yourself. But if you believe that people should pay you to make these choices for them, then you can take the same leap of faith in yourself. If you're disciplined about it and treat it formally as you would a client job, you will probably be pleasantly surprised that your branding and marketing tactics do in fact work!

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