

A brand is so much more than a promise . . .

The word "BRAND" is derived from an old English word that meant "burning stick" – enabling owners of livestock to burn their brand onto the hide of animals to claim ownership and provide others with a way to clearly recognize that ownership. Even in a herd of livestock, the "brand" was distinctive – differentiated from other brands – and therefore recognizable.

The brand also communicated relative value. The livestock carrying a certain brand identified them as coming from a highly respected herder who grazed his livestock in a certain area of the low country where the grass was extra green, and the meat from that livestock tasted better than from other livestock – so the herder's brand identified that livestock as more valuable than others.

And as more and more people in the village tried the meat, found it more tasty than meat from other livestock, talked about it with friends, tried the herder's meat several times and consistently found it more tasty, the *evidence* of distinction made the livestock with that herder's brand highly prized and they commanded a much higher price than other livestock.

Today that beef would be called "*Low-Country Beef*," recognized by consumers as more tasty – because the evidence, "*I've tried it several times and it's always very tasty,*" "*I saw an article in a magazine about it,*" "*My friends tried it and liked it,*" is compelling – and consumers believe that "*From low-country grazing comes tastier beef,*" so that beef with that brand commands a 15% premium at the meat counter.

Another way of looking at 'BRAND' is to think of making a purchase decision like being in a courtroom sitting in the jury box.

Two sides are making claims – just like when you're ready to buy a digital camera and you've narrowed the selection to either a Sony CyberShot or a Casio Exilim.

You came to the jury box with some information and perceptions already in your head – some randomly accumulated over time and some accumulated during preliminary research just thinking about the idea of getting a new camera:

- You've seen the Sony in ads, commercials, in magazines all over the place. It's won awards – very impressive. You've always thought of Sony as a quality brand. You know friends who have the camera and are satisfied.
- You don't know a lot about Casio, but you've been reading more about new technology they've developed that sounds interesting and the industry is taking notice.

But now you've crossed over from “considering” to “making a buying decision” and you're in the “**Buyer's Jury Box.**” Now this is serious.

You have to make a choice.

The judge in your head is reminding you that you are here to make an impartial evaluation of the evidence – not colored by previous perception (although you know that's really hard to do). But you make a commitment, because your decision is important.

In the opening argument, each side presents its claim – what their brand stands for – what differentiates their version of the truth from the other.

Each side then presents its evidence of the truth they claim – fact after fact – all meaningful, but one side seems to be a little better at it – the facts are presented more interestingly, you're paying attention a little more closely, the personality of the one attorney is just more appealing, the body language of some witnesses leads you to question their credibility.

The evidence mounts up and, during closing arguments, both attorneys leave you with a closing statement intended to sum up the essence of the brand's position – a take-away before going back to the jury deliberation room. One was better, more resonating than the other (à la “If it doesn't fit, you must acquit”).

In the end, after careful deliberation, while Casio's features and technology have wowed you and you think the Casio might actually be better for your needs, you select the Sony because the *evidence* that mattered most to you – confidence in the Sony name, a larger number of positive reviews on the web and compatibility with future Sony technology advances – outweighed the strong Casio presentation just enough to convince you to buy the Sony, even though it was \$30 more.

All this happens over a few seconds for some impulse buying decisions in a grocery store aisle, or over months of intensive research on a big-ticket purchase decision. The key point is that, as in the example presented here, often the selection is between strong brands and each makes a compelling Claim of Distinction. The selection decision is made on the **Evidence of Distinction** – an accumulation of information and perceptions that are weighed, judged, catalogued and challenged until an overall anticipated VALUE judgment for one contender is made that is strong enough to eliminate the other contenders and a selection is made.

This definition of brand has strong implications for marketers.

If brand is a **Claim of Distinction** – but it is the **Evidence** of distinction, not the promise or claim, that carries the day, then delivering and communicating evidence of distinction must be a company's prime objective.

Brand development, at its core, isn't about cute sock puppets or ways to deliver marketing messages. It's about discovering, sometimes uncovering what's *unique* about your company – the *one-of-a-kind* characteristics of your company that can influence choice and are totally credible because you have *evidence* of their truth.

Once a credible, defensible and relevant Claim of Distinction has been discovered, the real challenge is to then communicate the evidence that this Claim of Distinction is *truth* – in highly creative ways targeted to precisely defined publics.

So it might be said that a **successful brand's Claim of Distinction is "truth well told."** The truth is in the eye of the beholder, of course, and it is evidence that convinces us that what was promised as truth is indeed truth – and should influence the selection decision.

So could it also be said that a successful brand is a "**Claim of Distinction – with the evidence to back it up?**" A claim is meaningless in a cynical world bombarded by brand claims without the *evidence* that really influences choice.