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e-mail: nextstep@thedailystar.net

NEXT STEP

BRAND TALK WITH AFTAB MAHMUD KHURSHID

Aftab Mahmud Khurshid is widely known for his strategic business marketing and brand building expertise. He is also known as a renowned songwriter and author. With experience in diverse areas of the business-marketing spectrum in companies like ACI, Siemens, Trust, City and Standard Chartered Bank, he is currently the Group CMO of SSG. He shares his brand marketing tips and thoughts about next generation marketers with Next Step.

How does a brand care? How do you build an infrastructure for the people who deal with content creation?

A brand is the DNA of a company. So, branding must be the central focus of the management. Corporate entities need to relate their vision, mission and values to the overall business strategy, which will eventually be translated into brand strategy. Moreover, brand culture needs to be developed within the company so as to transform the workforce into part of the brand force.

To create a proper quality management system you have to build on your brand properly. The corporate culture has to be appropriate in order for the brand to live long and to increase product basket. Remember, people buy the brand not the product. That is how a brand cares.

Content is the context that sets you differently from others in marketing. Messages should be uniform visually, verbally and virtually. And this requires specialised people who are truly competent in brand marketing. Not everyone can nurture a brand. So structured brand marketing environment is needed for a strong corporate brand.

Do you think brands can be called art?

Branding is of course an art. At the same time, I also call it a strategic business science. The content of your communications is the key to differentiate you from other brands. And the content has to be finely chosen to position you perfectly. For example, to brand a bulb, you can say it illuminates well. But that would just be stating a general feature of the product. If you say that it is 'slim and smart' then



you are giving it a more artistic definition and instilling a more intense interest in the customer.

You are a great example of successful brand building. Give some tips to our young professionals on how to market themselves and create recognisable corporate brands.

My advice to a young professional would be to not be a bookish person. To be a successful marketer, you have to know the market as well as the culture besides the theory. You need to have business acumen and some natural in-built talents. Reality is different from the books.

Remember, from vision to strategy, employee to customer, interior to exterior – everything represents your

brand. Do something so that your customer speaks for your brand and refers your brand to others. People engagement is the future of marketing and innovative engagement models are coming up every day. So be updated with recent trends, always.

What do you think is the future of a career in marketing?

I can see a bright future for brand marketing. New businesses are flourishing. GDP growth is high and the future generation is grooming itself in the right manner for business. But upcoming marketers need to be under the umbrella of professional leadership. Employers or entrepreneurs should build up their enterprises in such a way that they will attract the best resources in the market.

It is important to note that marketing is not limited to traditional marketing anymore. Traditional marketing is being surpassed by digital marketing. Digital space is a new and revolutionary media of marketing. You can reach the global and local marketplace simultaneously.

Then there is the issue of corporate social responsibility. A strong brand manages its CSR aspect expertly.

If you look at the recent trend in marketing, you may notice the hype around strategic brand partnerships. Strategic decisions require both marketing knowledge as well as win-win relationships. Marketing now has new avenues to shape more and more opportunities for people.

So the future of marketing is bright indeed. Are there any challenges of brand marketing in a country like ours?

In many cases, the management philosophy is trade- and sales-oriented rather than brand-oriented. The benefits of brand strategy in overall business strategy is either not known or ignored. For this reason, right people are often not hired for the right positions.

Companies need to give due importance to image building. It should be considered as an investment instead of a cost, because at the end of the day only marketing and innovation can ensure an organisation's sustainability. Everything else is simply supporting cost.

Moreover, if your brand is not strong, it is difficult to acquire funds. Remember, a good brand can overcome crisis easily. Branding is a continuous creative engineering and strategic business process. Sometimes people think that anyone can be a brand expert, but there is a reason why there is

the saying, "When the CMO speaks the CEO listens."

What do local emerging companies need to build brand reputation? How can they become the employer of choice?

Entrepreneurs will fail if they have limited understanding of strategic branding. People think that brand marketing means advertising and PR. But in reality, the brand is everything from the vision to HR, the supply chain, quality products and services and CSR.

Local emerging companies need to build their employer brand into a place with the right work environment. Pay and perks should be competitive based on the market. There should not be any gender discrimination. To become the employer of choice, they need to hire the right people with the right skill sets in the right places. We call this employee branding.

Moreover in the age of globalisation, companies should think on a global level to maintain and retain top quality people. Because at the end of the day people matter. If you cannot retain your employees, your competitor will hire them because there is a scarcity of talent in the market.

Local companies have to build the right structure with a process-oriented business model. It is reassuring to know that new companies are now developing professional infrastructures. It is better to prepare yourself before learning from mistakes.

INTERVIEWED BY: SHUVASHISH ROY

The interviewer is a young marketing professional who is Strategic Project Planner, Business Development at The Daily Star

The dreaded question WORK OR HIGHER STUDIES?

Adulthood is a trap. Now that it is too late to get out of that ploy, you might as well plan around it and make it seem like you have you a strategy. After graduation, most of us think that studying was the hard part and later, life will unfold on its own. The job offers, the hefty cheque, own cosy desk and coffee breaks and all those delightful things on the list. Wrong!

"Work or higher studies?" - the question that maximum people dread.

Before committing yourself to another degree for the next year or two, or signing a contract with a company by pausing the student life, one must really weigh the pros and cons of the vital decision.

A graduate program is necessary after undergrad if your career focuses on fields such as healthcare, law, teaching, and social work, to name a few. A Master's degree can improve your career by enhancing your skills and increasing income earning potential. Keep in mind a degree eventually helps you increase your salary or attain a more fulfilling career. But one should consider the hidden opportunity costs of forgoing a job, that not working will reduce financial goals such as saving for a car, house or paying off a loan. A good job offer is hard to come by and firsthand work involvement is always preferred over book knowledge. A graduate degree is more valuable with a few years of added work experience. People who thrive to excel need to apply what they've learned to real-life issues in business or service. Only after they've been out in the actual world can they understand how certain theories will apply.

The effective quality of work and organisational skills has the leverage over a degree. Graduate school will always be there, a good professional opportunity may not. If you go to graduate school and obtain book knowledge yet lack interpersonal and time management skills, you are still lacking in things critical to most employments. Job hunting is a fierce and tedious dimension.

Although it is rare in our country, some companies tend to pay for employees to go to graduate school while they work. So if you have a gashly bank balance, look for a company with a generous tuition reimbursement plan. A graduate education can be an invaluable tool to help you accomplish certain goals in life, but it will not resolve any confusion or uncertainty about your career or life's ultimate purpose.

There is a special remarkable place for those who are able to juggle both work and grad school. They work from 9 to 5 and then classes from evening till night. These multitasking mortals shared their thoughts about their hectic lifestyle. They emphasise on how one must be willing to sacrifice social life, sleep and a bit of sanity in order to attain success. With rising tuitions, many people do not want to delay the degree and also think it is awkward to attend classes at an older age with younger students. While some still want to keep in touch with education, they want to be productive during the day time. Attending job and a grad school simultaneously teaches patience, dedication, persistence and a whole lot of focus in a span of two years.

Therefore, if you are solely pursuing a degree to quench your intellectual curiosity and passion then the case is settled there. Find out the best graduate programs in your chosen field in any country where you have always wanted to go. Set your mission on attending one of these top schools because where your graduate degree comes from does matter. If one is truly enthusiastic about a field of study like teaching, research, analysis then graduate school is the right place.

There is value in learning and acquiring knowledge and not everything has to be focused on work or built around a career. Lawyers, doctors, economists, scientists – they never stop learning!

So consider your decision wisely, it is always best to discuss with people who are involved in the area of occupation you want to pursue. Also finalise the verdict within a given time, and brief people who have the best interest in your future – parents, teachers, friends and mentors! Hopefully by the end of your undergrad, you will be able to answer the dreaded question – work or higher studies?

TANISHAA ARMAN



Making a DIFFERENCE

Bangladesh is rapidly moving towards middle income status by 2021. Our businesses definitely offer immense opportunities for the growing economy and this diversity needs a stage for the stories untold. See Bangladesh make its mark on the global map as Making a Difference brings you our proudest success stories from across the country.

Branding isn't restricted to the company, it extends to you too

In a society where conformity is valued over novelty, it might seem challenging to break out of the norm and build your own personal brand. We have been conditioned to want to be more like others, but this basic instinct for survival often renders us woefully mundane. And when you're sitting in the interview room, when it's time for that big promotion, being ordinary is hardly an option. Your set of skills, your fortes, your experiences, your attitude are what encompass your personal brand. It is your personal value offering to the customer, to the team, to the employer, to the company – it's what you do better than anyone else.

As the one-of-a-kind psychiatry genius turned highly-functioning serial killer Hannibal Lecter so aptly puts it, "If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power." Thus, it is important to know yourself and your own-able attributes (the ones you have now or the ones you want to gain over time) – and make it a point to use them to differentiate yourself from others. Sit down and ask yourself what exactly this means to you.

Still in doubt? Ask close friends what the total experience of having a relationship with you is like. Spot an inconsistency? You probably have some work to do because there is a gap between how you see yourself and how others see you. Communication is of the essence here because you are either not expressing the full spectrum of your ability or you are not doing it effectively. Tim Ferriss, an American entrepreneur and writer of The 4-Hour Workweek sums it up perfectly, "Personal branding is about managing your name – even if you don't own a business – in a world of misinformation, disinformation, and semi-permanent Google records."

Our brains are hardwired to pay attention to the unusual, but when we have to make the most of a near homogeneous academic background, all this talk of differentiating and communicating yourself is easier said than done. After you've identified your desired personal brand, you have to set about building that experience so you can effectively get what you want in return, no matter what that takes.

Whether you're at a meeting with a client, a team session or a networking event, you are constantly being evaluated by those around you. You are even being screened on social media as now more than ever, recruiters are observing and engaging with job



Brand yourself so that others see you the way you see yourself

candidates over sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. If you are found online and what is found is obsolete, incomplete, off-putting or inconsistent, then you are at the risk of being seen as a poor candidate, or employee, or leader.

A little mindfulness and some conscious management can go a long way when it comes to conveying your personal brand. It all boils down to how you serve yourself, what you offer others, and backing that up with a whole deal of conviction.

WORDS: AMIYA HALDER
ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

Writer is Sub-Editor of the career publication of The Daily Star. She is also a junior at the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka