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This month's Insider has two articles. The first is by Joy Ward, MA, MSBA.

We All Have PTSD Now

I don't think I'm saying anything new or even controversial when I say this has been a rough couple of years. Why is this non-news important? Because we are all suffering from various levels of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Unless we all understand and accept this sad fact we will never learn how to live with our neighbors again.

The last hundred years have been tough ones with massive societal and technological changes. So much has changed in the last more than fifty years most of us have had trouble adapting. Even younger generations are having trouble dealing with all the changes around us.

Children of the poor, and children living in rural communities, got virtually no education during the Pandemic.

Now, let's add in all the political, environmental, and economic changes and everyone, no matter the political outlook, is swimming in very deep and often dark emotional waters. For example, people complain about rising costs. But it's not just the rising costs, it is the fact

that we are spending more and more for things we are forced into buying because technological expectations change, such as expensive phone lines and streaming tv. Not so long ago those things were almost relatively free, or at least much less expensive. Now, it is impossible to exist in our society without them. And just try existing without broadband Internet. because school was supposed to "go virtual" and if you didn't have broadband you didn't have school.

Those are just two stressors. But there are many more. We are living in a time where very few people are immune from the fears plaguing us all. From fears of personal and family physical security to financial security to political security. It does not matter where you land on the political spectrum, everyone is tense.

So back to my initial point. We all have PTSD at some level. We usually think about soldiers or victims of crime and abuse as those with PTSD but we all have too much "fight or flight" and it's showing up in road rage, in store fights, shootings and general civic disagreeableness.

The hurricanes of Covid, political upheaval, and more have left everyone feeling jittery and at least a bit afraid.

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What do we do? We realize that everyone around us, including ourselves, are traumatized. We may not want to accept it but we must. We must start treating everyone we meet as if they are only a few steps from an emotional breakdown. We must treat everyone with respect and a bit more deference. In other words, let's cut them some slack. It costs us very little, but it could save someone's day, or even someone's life. —Joy Ward

Is Branding Dead? Going All The Way Down!

A recent study concluded that Millennials do not believe in brands. I don't think that's true. If you look at commercials online and on television, it might be that the companies that own brands and the advertising agencies that make commercials do not understand what a brand is, or how to create, manage, preserve, and grow a brand. It is like they are in a competition to see who can drag their brands down, down, all the way down.

So, what is a brand? You would think that we wouldn't have to start here, but based on what passes for branding in the marketplace, lots of people have forgotten. A brand is a gestalt, made up of all the interactions, beliefs, feelings, both good and bad of all the people who come in contact with the brand and contribute to the gestalt. That includes customers, competitors, employees, observers, everybody that comes in contact with the brand. Brands are organic, and grow by interaction. You can't "create" a brand. You can only watch it grow, and nurture it as it develops. Products have brands. Communities, groups of people, even individuals have brands. Brands have values. Brands can be positive, negative, or neutral.

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Millennials understand brands. Brand managers and advertising agencies who make commercials often don't. Often, I can't figure out who the audience is for commercials. Are the advertisers trying to tell their audience that they are so much smarter than the customers that they can get away with stupid Dad tropes? Do you really have to be stupid to buy that product?

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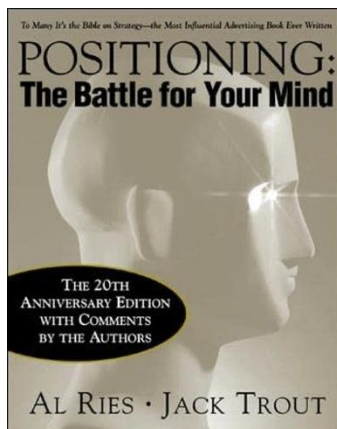
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Millennials have “super-heterodyne automatic BS detectors” that are always on, and always able to alarm at the first sign of b*llsh*t in advertising and marketing.

Sometimes companies get it. If you want to see commercials from a company that has gotten it right for years, look at any Subaru commercial. Notice that most other car commercials now have dogs in them, but Subaru owns that space, owns that brand, equating dogs and love and Subaru.

Advertising that talks down to customers, shows customers doing and saying obviously stupid things might be funny in a focus group, but think about what it does to the customer and to your brand values. You are saying to your customers, “You are stupid, or ignorant, or venal, or nasty if you buy this product, use this service.”

Recently, the car company, KIA, released a commercial that is the antithesis of Subaru’s. Drawing on their famous Gangsta Hamsters in a KIA Soul, and clearly trying to move the KIA Soul’s brand toward Latinx demographics, the Hamsters appear as skeletons, straight out of *Dia de los Muertos*. All I can think of is, “Did the hamsters die in a wrecked KIA Soul?”



You might think that most advertising agencies are in it for the awards— and frankly, you’d be right. The average agency tenure with a customer is less than five years. They don’t care about the brand, they only want the revenue, knowing that they will be gone soon. Many company executives, raised in the “two years and out” of Jack Welch’s GE, feel the same way. They’ve forgotten, if they ever read, Trout and Ries’ great book on branding. If you haven’t read it, and you have anything to do with your brand, go buy it and read it. It’s short.

In the industrial markets, we seem to be closer to our brands than the huge commercial mega corporations. This is a good thing. We are closer to our customers, closer to our development teams, and we generally are people who have some expertise and training in the products or services we sell. For better or worse, our product managers are usually raised up from the ranks of engineers or developers, and they know their products intimately. Sometimes this means that their marketing conversation is in the weeds, but usually it means that they have bought into the gestalt of their company and products at a very deep

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personal level. When they speak to customers, they come from that level, and customers get it. They get their sincerity, and so the positives of their brand is communicated to the customers.

And every time company employees have an interaction with a customer, they communicate and reinforce the brand they represent. Service people in some companies are the best salespeople around. They communicate their products' brand values directly to the customer when the customer is most vulnerable— when something has gone wrong and they need help. Service people who show they care about the customer reinforce the brand gestalt in a way that advertising cannot. Sales and marketing professionals often do the same. They are living the brand. Their brand shines through them like a searchlight. You cannot pay them enough to recompense them for the value they give you.

How do you get your people to be “brand evangelists” for you? There is an old Yiddish proverb, “A fish stinks from the head.” If you want your customer facing employees to be brand evangelists, you, your management, your staff, and all your inside facing employees (HR,

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employee communications, front office, etc.) must reflect the positive values of your brand. It's hard for a service person to communicate positive brand values if she knows she isn't valued by the company. You, and every single one of you, reflect your brand.

To see how well you're doing reflecting your brand, you have to ask people. Ask employees, customers, observers, and competitors. As you might guess, since the current spate of snarky, self-important advertising is developed mostly through focus groups, they don't seem to be working well. That's true. It's been true for years. What does work, every time, is what we call qualitative research. Focus groups can be manipulated, and only see the top of mind. Deep qualitative interviews, one-on-one, take longer, are more expensive, and totally worth it. Because what you get is the brand's deepest values as reflected in the people you interview.

If you want to know how to do qualitative research right, contact Joy Ward, the author of the first article in this INSIDER. She can be reached at joyward1627@gmail.com.

Good brand values can't be bought. All advertising and marketing can do is illuminate them for everyone to see. If your brand values aren't good, no amount of fancy commercials will make

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them good. What everyone will see is the cognitive dissonance between the brand values they know about, and what your advertising is trying to sell them. Nobody likes cognitive dissonance, and that brings us to another term of art in branding and in life: fugueing.

If the cognitive dissonance is strong enough, and deep enough, customers will fugue. That is, they will dither, decide to do nothing, or forget your brand. This can be seen both in purchasing of industrial products and services, and commercial products, and especially in voting. If the cognitive dissonance is too strong, people will simply not vote. That's fugueing. You don't want your customers to fugue on you. Truth is the best defense against fugueing.

In branding, it is all about training. Your people don't just get that way. They have to be shown, trained, how to communicate their brand values effectively. The first rule, always, is "Tell the truth." Branding training is something you need to conduct all the time. To begin, start doing internal qualitative research along with your external focused research. That will give you the questions, concepts and ideas you need to use to train your people.

Do this and your people and your brand will grow.



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