

Being the Ambassador of Your Brand

by David Cohen, Founder, Equation Arts, LLC

This one goes out to all the good folks who are up early in the morning, going to their local chamber of commerce, hitting that networking breakfast, and doing their part to keep the economy going through good old fashioned hustle. You are the ambassador of your brand.

When you swap cards at the chamber you are engaged in economic diplomacy, and the stakes are high for you and your business. When you stand up and give your 60, or 45, or 30-second speech at that networking lunch you are in the process of setting policy and expectations for inter-business relations.

Now here's the rub: you are you, AND you are the impression-setter for your company. You are the window by which your friends, partners, customers, and prospects become acquainted with your brand. If you are not projecting an image that is consistent with your brand then you are creating a disconnect in the minds of the people you meet; yet you must also be authentic to yourself. Of course it is easier when you own the company and you are the one setting the tone for vision, mission and values. However, even if you are working for someone else, you are shouldering the responsibility for framing the brand story for the people with whom you interact – if you are phony, it reflects on the brand, if you are impatient, it reflects on the brand, if you are overly “what’s-in-it-for-me”, that too, reflects on the brand. A brand can be a lot of things, and a person is a whole lot more complex, but you have to find a harmony that fits, that gives people access to you, and through you, to all the great value your company can bring.

A brand is in some ways an agreement between consumer and company about the value you promise, and your ability, consistency and quality in fulfilling that promise. As an individual working within the confines of your community you would call this “reputation”, but thanks to the Internet and the proliferation of social media, reputation is no longer bounded by mere geography. Reputation can carry well beyond the reach of a handshake. The reach isn't only measured in distance, but in time. Like an elephant, the Internet never forgets, and the accumulation of information about you that becomes the basis of your reputation is hard to scrub away. You can add to the story, but almost never remove from it. Being the ambassador of your brand is acknowledging this. It is recognizing that the ripples you create will persist and reflect back on you over time. Your community is bigger than ever, yet closer than ever before.

Whether we realize it or not, the actions we take are measured against expectations created by our brand. This is true for businesses, but it is also true for individuals. In some cases expectation setting can be a slippery slope. Consider the deliberately expectation-setting tag line for Avis car rental service, “We Try Harder” – certainly this phrase leads to an assumption that the service from Avis will reflect more effort than their competitors. We infer that the extra effort will result in better service. It's a memorable phrase, and a noble goal, but what does it mean for the individual, for the brand ambassador? That depends on the follow-through of every Avis employee you meet. If the employee adopts a positive, service-focused, can-do attitude then there is an alignment between the brand message and individual. If however, the trend is to have service that is poor, attitudes that are uncaring, or worse, surly, then the brand message collapses under the weight of the failure of the individual to live up to the expectations created in the mind of consumers.

In the age of the blogosphere, disconnects between promise and follow-through can be rapidly exposed. The lesson boils down to “walk your talk.” Sometimes the “talk”, the expectation, is set by your boss, or corporate policy, but you take on the responsibility of the “walk” every time you pass your business card to a new prospect or partner. If it is your own company you do get the benefit of being able to choose the expectations you set at a policy level, but you are also under even stronger scrutiny when it comes to follow through.

Since Avis has used the “We Try Harder” line for a long time now I will gladly assume that it has been a fair reflection of their actual brand experience. However, not every tag line is so overt in the expectations it sets. What promises does your branding imply? And do you deliver on those expectations? Like any ambassador, your role as ambassador of your brand is to promote and develop trust. Consistency of message and behavior are some of the most powerful tools in developing trust, but they require time to nurture and grow. Trust is an essential asset and a powerful catalyst to accelerate business, but it is also incredibly fragile. If expectations are repeatedly out of alignment with delivery then trust will not be established and your brand diplomacy will be a failure.

A brand ambassador is also in the business of building consensus and support amongst allies. When you go to a networking event, you take the time to dress up, you make sure you have your business cards in your pocket, you practice your elevator pitch, but have you put any thought into who your strategic allies might be in the room? Retailers put a tremendous amount of time and energy into tweaking and tuning the merchandising of stores. There is a conscious effort to setup product adjacencies that will encourage increased sales, complementary product sets, and impulse buys. Why not apply the concept to yourself at the next chamber of commerce luncheon? You probably already know some of the folks in the room – think about what they offer and how your offering would look on the shelf next to them. If you own a car wash, maybe you can work a deal with the local mechanic to offer a mutually beneficial offer that brings added value to your customers (wash & tune anybody?). By combining your strengths with those of your ally you can extend the reach of your brands and grow a larger community of consumers.

What’s your brand’s diplomatic policy? I’ll leave you with this exercise: Try writing down the 3 to 5 most important aspects you want your business contacts to recognize in your brand. Then write down the 3 to 5 perceptions you want people to have of you. How well do they align? Ask a trusted friend if this is the image you are projecting. Go over your elevator pitch, your handshake line, your stadium speech, and see if it serves both you and your brand. Does it meet the criteria you’ve written down? Keep tweaking and tuning – you’ll know when you’ve found the right balance, because it will both feel good, and will attract the people that you want to connect with: the ones aligned with the value you offer and the working vibe that suits you best. That’s the best kind of business diplomacy.