

Brand Imaginings by Julie Cucchi

Years ago, women's 'consciousness raising' groups designed a mental exercise to raise awareness and lower barriers. In an effort to broaden the perspectives of un-empowered women, the group leader would challenge each member to imagine herself not as a woman, wife or mother or even as a human being, but as a building. "What kind of a structure would you be? Where would you be? What would you be made of? What would be going on inside your walls?" The purpose of the exercise was to force women outside their conventional modes of experience, to unlock their strengths and help them discover hidden potential.

Who would have guessed this tool of the woman's movement would be successfully repurposed as a brand exercise. We often ask clients, in the initial phase of our discovery process, to imagine their product, institution or service beyond its current form, as an actual physical space. The choices made, as they create the blueprint for this imaginary, ideal brand 'store', are invariably illuminating. By asking brand managers to use their extensive, if literal, knowledge of the brand to fuel their imagination, we gain insight into the brand's potential, its limitations and the expectations of its current stewards.

This exercise has historically pushed bottom-line warriors up to, but not over, the line between "this is interesting" and "this is crazy." Now along comes a brand which boldly dares to cross that line. Apparently too impatient to dabble in theory, Song, Delta Air Lines' new low-fare service, has opened an actual physical space in Soho. (Look! On the corner of Prince and Greene! It's an airline! It's a store! It's a brand!!)

If you run a healthcare company or market a detergent you probably aren't about to invest in a big, bottom-line crushing, retail space in order to make a statement. But there's plenty to learn from an airline that did.

Location, Location, Location

Your mother was right: the people you spend time with really do affect your reputation. Brands also become associated with the people and places they hang out with. Want to convince your target that you're the hip, youthful airline? Plunk yourself down next to the galleries and boutiques that they frequent (or aspire to frequent). Ask yourself where your brand would build its flagship; what state, which city, which zip code? Your decision should not necessarily be based on considerations such as traffic volume or historical expectations. Location makes a statement about your brand.

One of the first issues you'll face in the process of choosing an address concerns your target. This target might not be the group currently responsible for the bulk of your sales. Perhaps they represent the influencers who will move your brand to the next level. In any case, nothing focuses the mind, or reveals strategic fuzziness like having to choose a place to break ground.

What's the Vibe?

If you were opening a restaurant one of the first issues you would tackle is how you want the place to feel when the customer enters the room. Imagine your brand as a physical space and ask yourself that same question. Should it be warm and cozy or cool and chic? What colors should you use? What materials? What kind of lighting? Answering questions like these force decisions about some very basic, but critical aspects of your brand's persona. (Song, for instance, appears to have designed its Soho space to reflect the stress-free atmosphere of the ideal flight experience.)

Better yet, write the brief for the interior designer. Remember that this piece of paper alone will serve as inspiration for the entire look and feel of the space. Brands like Apple, Nike and Origins are instructive models in moving from a presence in the box to a statement on the block with a nearly seamless translation of tone. The specificity and clarity of your direction, as you imagine your own brand space, will serve you well in all sorts of future brand efforts even if you never make it to the ribbon cutting ceremony.

What's in Store?

The Song Airlines 'store' includes installation art, luggage, electronics, a flight simulator, X-Box games and Kate Spade fashions (she designed the flight attendant uniforms). Though unexpected, each one of these choices not only makes sense, but adds depth and meaning to the brand. What other brands would enhance your own? What pairings could you imagine that, like mint and lamb, are both unexpected and surprisingly successful. Hint: it always helps to start from your consumers' point of view. Think specifically about their lives, habits and behaviors beyond the direct purchase of your brand and you'll find surprising clues into other possible offerings. Finally, once you've filled your space, decide what to put in the window. This decision helps you prioritize in a way no conference room discussion ever could.

Just as women of the 1970's became enlightened and empowered by the original, brands can benefit immeasurably from this exercise in brand imaginings. The process of creating the blueprint and detailed plans for such a venture is itself rewarding. However, even more valuable (and critical) is the ability to arrive at a final consensus on these issues. If your brand team can agree on the answers to questions that arise as you create a physical experience, you will have done your brand a tremendous service--even if you never actually take a Soho address.