



BUILDING A STRONG BRAND CAN BE AS REWARDING AS  
**\$TRIKING GOLD**

EDITORIAL | DAVID M<sup>C</sup>NALLY

For companies smart enough, and lucky enough, to sustain a strong brand — that brand is a gold mine. **For a great brand, customers will drive the extra mile, pay the extra dollar, and refuse to consider lower-priced “me too” offers from competitors.**



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STRIKING GOLD**

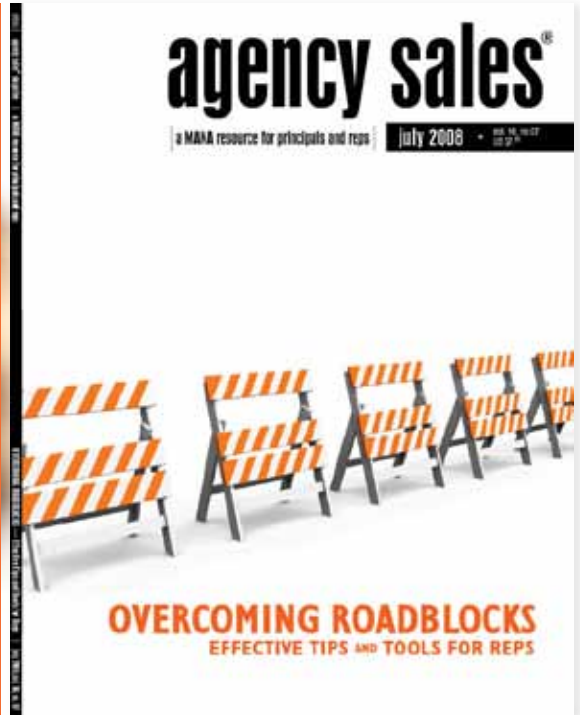
REPRINTED FROM

**agency sales<sup>®</sup> magazine**  
july 2008 • vol.38, no.07

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**DAVID McNALLY**

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**But what is it that commands this kind of loyalty?** The answer is simple: customers are loyal to great brands because those brands deliver great *experiences*. As it gets harder and harder for companies to stand out through unique product features or technology, strong brands consistently provide distinctive, high-quality customer interactions that low-cost competitors cannot easily duplicate.

**How do they do it?** It's done by engaging employees in a continuous strategy to maintain high standards across every area of the enterprise — sales, customer service, marketing, and operations — right down to the fork lift drivers in the warehouse. Those employees are the ones who shape perceptions. They create the experiences that customers value enough to return to the brand, time after time.

As a professional, you are also in a “competitive market.” You are competing with others who may have qualifications similar to yours — all vying for the recognition and rewards that come with outstanding performance. If you interact with your company's customers, you are also part of the team that is competing to deliver the very customer experiences that can strengthen or weaken your company's brand, not to mention your own.

While you may not have thought of yourself as having a “brand,” the fact is, people have perceptions of you based on their experiences with you over time. As your customers, co-workers and managers interact with you, they form impressions that together make up your personal and professional brand. Thus, by our actions, we are “branded.” We can't really avoid it. And opportunities for career growth and recognition come to those with strong brands — the ones who have credibility, who are trusted, and who are seen as the “go to” people.

**So what's your brand today?** A brand is formed on the basis of impressions over time — shaped by observations of *what* you do, your role, and even more importantly, by *how* you do it (e.g. your standards). Because standards are so visible to others through actions and behaviors, they represent the best opportunity to consciously shape the perceptions and strengthen your professional brand.

**Standards: The How of the What**

To better understand standards, think about the people you know in your work environment, and even whole teams of people. **What are they known for?** Perhaps you can think of an individual who has a reputation for delivering work that is always accurate and on-time. Maybe you know someone who consistently offers unusually creative answers to problems, while someone else has a reputation for being exceptionally customer-focused and persistent in meeting customer needs.

There might be a member of your work team who insists on getting to the root of a problem and is never satisfied with an easy fix or the “good enough” answer.

Terms such as “accurate,” “responsive,” “focused on the customer,” “prompt,” and “reliable” describe the standards that play a critical role in defining the quality of experiences people expect from their interactions with others. Standards represent the means of making a unique impression that is exclusive to you. They are an important key to the “competitive advantage” of your brand.

To examine your current brand and look for opportunities to strengthen it, take a closer look at your standards.



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### What Are Your Standards?


Discovering the standards you are known for — or what you want to be known for — involves holding up a very useful, but not always flattering, mirror. The trick is to see yourself as others see you, and to ask yourself some critical questions about your current and ideal standards:

- ❑ **What am I best known for right now by my peers, my manager, my internal and external customers?** What are your current standards? Are you known for doing what you say you will do? Is your work known for high quality? Do you show up to help when others need you?
- ❑ **Do the current standards that I'm known for represent the best quality of performance I am capable of delivering?** Are there gaps between your "ideal" standards and the ones you demonstrate now? Where are those gaps? Think about specific tasks and responsibilities you have and consider how you go about performing those tasks. Does the image that comes to mind represent your own highest standards? How do those standards stack up with what you observe in others?
- ❑ **What could I do differently to better demonstrate my ideal standards and ultimately strengthen my brand?**

Think about specific actions and behaviors that would influence other people's perceptions of your standards, or actions that would help you reach the standard of performance you want. For example, if you want to be seen as a person who listens to customers' perspectives and understands their needs, you might hone in on your ability to ask good questions and be an outstanding listener.

Even though you can't control what others think, you can guide people to perceive you as you want, based on your day-to-day actions and willingness to continually "raise the bar" on how you do what you do — your standards.

Having high standards is not about trying to please everyone. It is, however, about being aware that the strength of your brand in both your professional and personal relationships will be determined by the impressions you make every day on the people that are important to you and who matter most.

To the extent that your brand stands out because of your high standards, you will find increasing opportunities to grow your career while helping your company grow its business. 

## tips+tools

### to brand or not to brand

A question on branding was raised in the midst of this year's **Keystone Conference**. In and of itself that was hardly a surprise, since reps are always concerned about how they are perceived in the marketplace. The discussion focused specifically on whether the rep should brand himself or show the principal's brand.

What was interesting was the reaction of one rep who took issue with just about everyone else in the room. Here's how the conversation transpired: MANA's Bryan Shirley emphasized how important it was for the rep to always show his colors first. "Make sure the customer knows they are dealing with 'Such and Such Rep Firm.' Your agency name should appear first and foremost in all contacts with customers."

Following on the heels of Shirley's comments, Hank Bergson, president and CEO of NEMRA, maintained that "it's the intelligent rep who establishes his brand — not the principal's — as the brand in the territory. It's the rep who owns the relationship and possesses the territorial knowledge. You're the one who's known by your downstream customers as bringing quality products to them from quality manufacturers."

It was then that things got interesting, with just one rep in the entire audience being adamant that that's not the way to go, especially when you (i.e., the rep) are in attendance at a trade show. He was quick to maintain that everyone else in the room was incorrect, and it's very important for the rep to put his principal's brand in front of the customer.

Finally, a show of hands was asked for to indicate who agreed with this rep. When one other rep voiced agreement, it was urged that these two reps have lunch together.

The reason we mention this discussion is that we'd like your input. Who's right? Who's wrong? Or, is there some middle ground that ought to be explored? Let us know how you view this subject, and we'll follow up in subsequent issues of **Agency Sales**. 