

Brand Positioning – The Semantic Differential

One of the most interesting activities regarding branding is called a Semantic Differential exercise. It is important to delineate salient attributes that form the brand and ensure that the business plans all point toward those attributes. Those unwavering attributes provide needed clarity for the brand.

The Semantic Differential exercise is an excellent tool to help align those attributes not only for today, but as importantly, where you may want to steer the organization in the future. I particularly enjoy conducting this exercise with senior management teams to gauge how similar the executives view the state of their brand. All too often, there are some glaring “a-ha moments!” where the team is clearly disjointed on specific attributes.

Once the exercise is complete with the feedback from each team member, shoring up disparities for today as well as mapping tactics to move the organization toward the future can begin. Invariably, most leave the exercise with a sense of humbleness and humility. In the end, though, the steering attributes have been established and the march toward their execution may begin.

The Semantic Differential asks the following question: “How would you describe the personality attributes of the brand in terms of how it is perceived **today** versus how it should be perceived in the **future**?”

Determine Opposite Attributes: The attributes outlined can easily serve most brands. If you feel compelled to add more, consider attributes that are opposite one another, not necessarily negative to one another. Once attributes are identified, each team member should complete a present and future chart for their feelings on the brand.

Reconcile The Results: Next, consolidate all the individual answers on the chart with both present and future attributes, now is the time to put them into action. Business plans that are developed for implementing tactics should be vetted against this chart for consistency. For large gaps, the action items may need to address multiple components from marketing to operations to culture etc.

Be Realistic: As with everything, an organization and team need to be realistic. Sometimes the gaps are just too great to overcome. K-Mart may aspire to become the next Tiffany, but realistically, the gap is way too far apart. Organizations need to be aspirational with their brands, but within reason. It is OK to be a very operationally sound company that fits within your competency.

Re-Visit Annually: Lastly, this shouldn't be a one-and-done. Reviewing the Semantic Differential annually is a healthy exercise to ensure that the organization is still on track. Aligning the senior

team members on your overall branding will enable them to cascade directives that complement the overall desire of the future of the brand. Without clarity at the top, the cascading message to the troops will be a muddy mess of noise in the field.

In summary, the Semantic Differential is an excellent communication tool that can translate some fairly abstract brand ideas into tangible directions. Using this chart as a guide, tactical implementations can be vetted against the steering attributes on an ongoing basis. Brand clarity is paramount for a company to keep on target and maximize the strengths of its efforts.