

Strong corporate image begins with well thought out strategy

Developing a strong corporate image begins with a thorough understanding of how the company is perceived both internally and externally.



CHRISTINE M. HOLLINDEN

Hollinden
Professional
Services
Marketing

SPECIAL TO
HOUSTON
BUSINESS
JOURNAL

A good starting point is to have upper-level management summarize their thoughts about how the company is currently perceived within the context of the company's mission statement. Gather this same feedback from employees, vendors and clients utilizing a process that encourages honest, unbiased opinions.

Ask each group to list the company's strengths, weaknesses and key differentiators. Better yet, have each draft a 30 second "elevator pitch" about the company. Compare the feedback to management's perceptions. Then identify, discuss and vet out any discrepancies.

If there are no discrepancies, continue driving home the firm's key marketing messages, fine-tuning them as needed based on business, demand or environmental changes. However, few companies have achieved such a well-aligned corporate image. Many companies will discover that reality and perception fall into one of the following two categories:

- **The company is off the mark.** If the company is not living up to its marketing rhetoric, there is a misalignment between reality and management's perception. If services or products are not living up to consumer's expectations, then a product-level, or operational, change is in order.
- **The customer is not getting the message.** The process may reveal that legitimate, positive marketing messages are simply not being heard. For instance, if the company is the leading provider of midmarket accounting services yet the market perceives the firm as a second- or third-tier provider, this indicates the miscommunication of marketing messages and corporate image.

The fix: Diagram what it takes for a client to do business with the company. Identify all areas in which the company is falling short of customer expectations. Then, develop a detailed action plan to address the critical issue. This process could take weeks or years, depending upon the severity of the misalignment.

The key: Look carefully at the little things – personal attention, communicating in the manner in which they prefer (reporting formats, email vs. telephone), follow up, thanking them for the business, what happens if something goes wrong or is delayed that make existing or potential customers indifferent.

It is relatively easy to get the big things right (*price, product, quality*); it is often the small (*inexpensive*) details that can boost a corporate image and, ultimately, market share.

The fix: Communicate core strengths to the target audience. Jump start the corporate image by re-examining the marketing messages and the delivery mechanisms (*advertisements, brochures, Web site, direct mail*). Take a bolder, more focused approach to increase market awareness, and pursue this action aggressively until the gap between perception and reality disappears.

Throughout the process, keep an open mind and prepare for surprising or unpleasant feedback. It is not unusual for management's views of the company's image to be one step removed from the marketplace. A strong brand and a clear corporate image require continuous feedback and pro-active strategic adjustments.

CHRISTINE HOLLINDEN, is the president of Hollinden, a professional services marketing firm providing marketing strategy, graphic design, Web design and public relations services. She is also an adjunct professor of marketing at the University of St. Thomas.