

brandinstinct*

Consolidating is such sweet sorrow

by Aaron Shields

Alright, you have identified that you want to shrink the number of brands in your portfolio in order to gain cost efficiencies and create more clarity for the customer. Furthermore, senior management are on board and have given you the green light for the plan. How in the world do you sell this to the teams that gave birth to these brands? How do you avoid dashing their hopes? How do you get them to believe that switching their emphasis to your parent brand will do them good?

Naturally, some brand owners have expressed concerns over losing what they had created in the market and have felt somewhat threatened by the recommendations and international best practice that were recommended. We believe it would be very productive if we could build confidence around the proposed changes and demonstrate that the brand owners also own the responsibility for the changes that will take place in their portfolio of brands.

In our experience, brand owners naturally take great pride, not only in the brand that they have created, but also in all the positive actions that have gone into creating that brand. The trick is to capitalise on these constructive actions in order to continue growing the parent brand. An important message to convey – again and again – will be that you are not abandoning everything that you learned when creating

these sub-brands as the company transitions to a streamlined portfolio.

This message will need to be reinforced in the actions you take next, so that you can reassure the sub-brand owners that all their good ideas will be utilised as you continue to build the focus on the parent brand. As a first exercise, you can meet with these brand-owners and ask them to take an inventory of all the activities and communication techniques that work well with their sub-brands. This activity can be facilitated by you with groups in smaller sessions, getting them talking in detail about the factors that led to their sub-brand's success. The activities under discussion can be based on current or past experiences. Essentially you want to understand what the team has been doing well, so that you can transfer as much of this learning and skill into their new roles without losing any of the intellectual capital associated with the original development of these sub-brands.

This exercise has three effects. First, it helps the team retain their confidence that their hard work is appreciated and will continue to be appreciated. Second, it will help to capture important information about the 'sub-brand experiments' that have taken place before we eliminate them potentially losing the knowledge that made them a success. Third, by talking about the

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detail of each activity, the brand owners will be able to discern which elements of their effort were due to creative strategies, approaches to market, and customer focus as opposed to the intrinsic virtues of the sub-brand itself. As a brand agency, we often find that this exercise results in the realisation that the parent brand does not hold the sub-brand back. Indeed, brand owners often conclude that if they applied the same efforts and actions to the parent brand as they did to the sub-brand, that their brand offering would have been even more of a success.

There are no magic questions to ask during these sessions. The key to a successful session is in getting down to the finer detail and having an open i.e. not an agenda-driven, conversation about the reasons for the successes enjoyed by the sub-brand and what they would like to take into the future. Since these are smart, driven people, you will not need to 'lead them by the hand'. Whilst examining the detail behind their successes, they will draw their own conclusions, either during the session or shortly afterward.

It may sound elementary but you will need to focus mainly on the positive aspects of their experience of the creation and maintenance of their sub-brands. If you focus on the negative, or adopt a problem-solving approach, you may run the risk of dampening their already bruised enthusiasm. Furthermore, you will not learn what has made these sub-brand teams' efforts a success. Often in change situations, a problem-solving approach will result in the association of change with the confrontation of hurdles or problems that need to be reckoned with, but do not necessarily drive the success of the brand.

Emphasis must be placed on highlighting that the brand owners' activities up to this point have been worthwhile and have produced positive

results. In order to understand how to replicate and improve upon these results for the parent brand, we need to inventory the detail of what works well in the promotion and delivery of the brands they created. What tricks did they learn when promoting this brand? What messages have been particularly effective? How much detail do they go into when talking about the technical nature of the product or service? What aspects of their communications stick in customers' minds? What kind of customers respond best to the brand they created? Why do they believe this? What elements of the sub-brand excite them? How have they led the market against the competition?

How will you use this inventory of useful data? You need to plot out the major milestones for phasing out the brands from your portfolio so that you can map the effective migration of the brand portfolio and reassure your teams that their learning will be brought into play. Relative milestones can be used e.g. stage one will contain those changes effective immediately, stage two will begin when the parent brand is re-launched, stage three is one year from the parent brand re-launch.

Use the inventory developed by the brand owners to help put into context how much work will be required to integrate the sub-brands back into the parent brand. If it is simply a question of bringing in a new copy-style for communications, then it will not take much to bring the sub-brand into the fold of the parent brand.

At this point in the programme, you will need to appreciate the impact of what you have told them, that you are 'taking their babies away'. In order to soften the blow, you will want to rebuild their confidence and remind them of all their achievements promoting these brands and reiterate the value of capturing this learning before changing the portfolio.



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