



Resuscitating a “stale service brand”

Dr T R Madan Mohan

.Introduction

Owners of three old and established hospitality and service brands were battling a shift. Once a well known bakery chain based out of Bangalore that was a mecca for breads and creator of novel products like Aloo Puff, Khara Bun and Honey Cakes, it has been losing sheen in last few years. Other was the first hop for most train traveller exiting Chennai (Madras as it was known then) to savour their Biryani's and Kabab's. Keeping pace with the expansion of the city and catching up with the transformation of Madras to Chennai has been a tough journey for this 3rd generation brand. Last one was an iconic restaurant in that dished out Mutton chops for over five decades and had earned the distinction of having a traffic signal named after them. It was a must stop for most tourists thronging to Puri and beaches of Odisha, and many food magazines and TV channels had covered them extensively. Unfortunately, recent years have seen the growth and revenues of all these establishments stagnating and the sheen of their brands chipping away. From iconic institutions of yesteryears they have been losing the race against the new kids in the block. Management had tried expanding within their geographies, invested in me-too expansive shops, albeit with no results. It saddens many a business owners to realize their brands have become stale.

Symptoms of Stale Brand

A brand starts turning stale when:

- 1) It is not able to sustain and grow the market share while the market may be growing
- 2) Even with increased spend, marketing campaigns have been ineffective in driving traffic and demand
- 3) Media, competition and consumers start referring as a "has been brand"
- 4) Emerging customer segments not associating with a brand.

If not addressed in right time, a stale brand can damage the business. A service brand has to evolve to accommodate the changes in consumer tastes and market dynamics. A business owner can take several measures to infuse new life into the brand. Many business owners believe changing the logo and refurbishing would help them to tide over the challenges. Redesigning logo may not help as branding is more than a symbol. Updated graphics can't arrest brand slippage if the product and customer experience are not addressed. Branding is much bigger than logo. In a service setting, branding encompasses service design, customer interactions, products/service of consumption, packaging, physical settings and much more.

Revitalizing a Stale Brand

Resurrecting stale service brands is a possibility. **Personalization, automation, redundancy, standardization and refreshing the mix** are some of the levers that are available for stale brands to shed their slumber. Symphony (product pruning), CVS Health (innovation lab), J.Hilburn (personalization), and Party Galaxy (automation) are examples of companies that have successfully wriggled out of valley of near death. They all have successfully addressed:

- What is unique about them
- Who are the customers they should target
- What customer experience must they be providing

- What sets their customer experience apart
- How they have embellished the service with their legacy

There is hope and a silver lining for brands that may have pressed a downward escalator.

Steps to revitalize a Stale Brand

A stale service brand can be revitalized by adopting following approaches.

1. **Revisit the Service concept:** A stale service brand must evaluate the core aspects, revisit the value proposition and identify the changes it needs to bring about in the physical environment, people, systems & process and customer experience. While plain bakery display equipment could have been a passé with a previous generation it may not be so with millennials. The customer may see the space as much more than just buy bread from shelf experience, but sit, imbibe and immerse the bakery experience. On the same lines, while a cardboard private boxes could have passed off as “family rooms” in the past providing privacy to families and tipplers; new generation may require a more open design. Most stale brands when they attempt repositioning replicate their original store designs without customizing to the current trends. A stale brand went in for a large size store format which had no impact on customer experience or the service concept. While per unit of store front increased the foot falls and revenues were not commensurate with the increase in spend. Repositioning the brand requires evaluating the complete experience, areas where customers could be involved in the service to bring cost

advantages, colours and materials to stimulate a particular sensory experience, and standardization of process including recovery.

2. **Prune offerings:** Companies that own stale brand must relook at the value of each product. Some companies may find the products/services they carry have become commodities or no more “Value” pullers. Case in point was butter biscuits. With entry of international cookies and launch of premium biscuits by Britannia and other companies, the product may not be a crowd puller any more. Reckitt Benckiser, world’s largest cleaning product company derives 40% of its revenues from products that are less than 3 years old.

3. **Play on your uniqueness:** Legacy certainly has its advantages. With experience and expertise on its side, companies with a long history in the business would have developed capabilities or experiences unique to them. Revitalizing a stale brand can be easy if the brand story can be recapitulated and made relevant. Café Scher, a Viennese pastry shop has retained its old world charm and draws the whole world. Asitane, famous for Ottaman cuisine experience brings alive 500 year old recipes and ambience. Even if you have a unique product, the key here is to consider all the other elements that can enhance the customer experience. Ensure your non-core elements including packaging and presentation can reinforce your “uniqueness”. Pascal Gomes the famous Goan baker still retains the 100 year old wood-fired mud oven and invites

the curious customers for a walk-in in the morning to savour the bye gone era.

4. **Redesign the customer experience:** To resurrect a stale service brand, you must invest in customer relationships. Improving the total customer experience and identifying what could Wow the customer (delight) is very important. By investing in improved customer relations you not only build relationship capital, but also defend your territories from your competitors. Another major advantage of investing in relationship is you that you could plug “service recovery costs” and other leakages.
5. **Bring a sense of urgency, and focus into teams:** A quick turnaround of a stale brand requires associates who can take challenges, unlearn, learn and re-learn new skills and take responsibilities. Lean times are the best moments to promote the entrepreneurial individuals and build a many leader centred organization. Instead of traditional hierarchical structures and associated incentive regimes, try out democratic structures with multi-skilling to optimize the cost. Communicate, communicate and communicate the new positioning, expected customer experiences and intended behaviours.
6. **Can and celebrate your organizational culture:** In happier times and founding years when the tap of the business has been sweet, consciously or otherwise seeds of organizational culture are sown. The camaraderie that arises out of common community, language and other associations would have ingrained a certain culture. A stale brand can

invigorate itself by revisiting the soul of organization, considering what of the culture must be canned and protected to scale up. Identify the right programs, training and development sessions that show your commitment towards organization culture.

7. **Brand smartly:** Reworking on stale brand requires one to work out the box and within it. Identify all possible innovative and cost effective product and brand engagements that are possible. Pursue low cost social media and community branding approaches. Old Spice, which carried the albatross of grandfather medicine smell around it neck rediscovered its mojo when it released “The Man Your Man could Smell Like” campaign. Local community events, newspapers, employee led campaigns, lotteries and draws, creating a cultural extravaganza around their service are fine examples of low cost approaches that yield significant results. Focus on effective marketing communications rather than tactical promotions that drive short-term sales at the expense of the brand equity. Continuous & consistent communications is a sure fire approach rather than fireworks big bang approach. Employ all offline and online media assets to assiduously reaching out to loyalists, first timers and influencers.

Addressing brand staleness is not easy. It requires commitment and investment. Transforming a stale brand requires complete re-evaluation of service concept, the design, people, process and experience. If the brand has high residual value (high awareness or positive image) the brand can be still salvaged. Adopt no

piece meal approach, but a complete look at what is the service, how the services embellish its legacy in design and customer contact areas and manage customer experience.

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