

BRAND YOUR SAND

In the minds of most consumers there is little difference between one timeshare and another except their location on the beach or simply . . . the sand beneath ones feet. While differing reservation systems exist, Points, Float or Fixed, the fact remains, timeshares are more strikingly similar than they are different. And all tout their ability to exchange, "So if you don't like the sameness at our place, you can always trade and go somewhere else . . . equally just the same".

So What's Missing?

Brand identity. Not reputation or recognition, not just logos and slogans, but 'brand', those intangible qualities that connect emotionally with consumers, that create intrinsic value and differentiates your product from the herd. The term originates



from the Old West practice of marking cattle for identification. Today brand management is a major industry utilizing statistical surveys, market analyses and neuro-behavioral sciences. Motivating consumers to buy one product over another is BIG business.

In timeshare marketing there is little attention spent to branding. After all, marketing is merely the time between an OPC encounter and a couple's arrival for a 90 minute presentation. The sale is made at the table, not some ad agency's board room. So the adage applies, if it ain't broken . . . or is it?

Events over the last few years are challenging that notion and should serve as a wake up call to resort developers. Is it time to brand your sand?

Brands: What Are They?

The definition of a 'brand' offered by The American Marketing Association is: *a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers.*

From that is derived *Brand Impression*: the experiential residue or emotional experience left in the consumer's mind by an encounter with that product. It serves as the touchstone for future decisions. If positive, it represents an added value called *brand equity* or the likelihood you would buy that product again or return to that resort or purchase a membership there. You might even refer a friend.

Brands are iconic, larger than the product they represent. They are trusted, stored in memory, nested among emotions associated with that experience. They are a promise to maintain the relationship and until or unless broken will habituate the consumer's choice for that product.

Think how you go about purchasing your toothpaste, detergent or favorite beverage – by familiarity and habit, and you have for years.

The amazing power of brands has been demonstrated in blind taste tests. Consumers who showed a strong taste preference will continue to buy their favorite brand cola, even though they preferred the taste of the other. Brands trump logic. They are motivational magnets. They sell at a premium. And importantly, if you are not a brand you are a commodity – headed for the sale bin.

Here Comes the Brands

Over the last few years we have seen national hotel brands successfully extend their presence into the timeshare space. Industry pundits even attribute their entry as a signal of timeshare's growing acceptability.

Brand extension is the expansion of a brand's influence from one product sector to another. Mr. Clean with the slogan "Cleans your whole house and everything in it"; easily moved into automotive care products by extension of its brand. On the cautionary side if it doesn't 'click' with the consumer, brand extension can become brand disaster. In timesharing, Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt are examples of successful brand extensions from hotel lodgings to timeshare memberships. In the consumer's mind the circle remains unbroken, the promise still kept, the extension made.



Suddenly with the successful entry of brand name resorts, all other timeshares are relegated to the lower shelf of the grocery aisle. Now called 'independents', many are no less quality, but they are less brand and . . . if not a brand -- a commodity. Is it time to brand your sand?

You Can't Hide Behind Transparency

Secondly and more damaging is the transparency brought on by the internet. Timeshare's best and worst features are now broadcast on the internet for the interested. And interested they are. Studies suggest more than 76% of

vacationers research their destination on the internet before departure. Once back home, many share their opinions on the web with the next wave of travelers. The most embittered, mistreated and misanthropic are the loudest and most likely. Here's a portion of an actual user-posted opinion:

Pros: Beautiful beaches with pearly white sand. Heavenly!

Cons: Stay away from the timeshare goons. They're everywhere and will ruin your vacation.

It's clear in the above post that the sand made a good impression; timeshare not so good. Accordingly the responses to the web page question: "Did you find this post helpful" were a resounding yes. Eventually this percolates to the bottom line by increasing marketing expenses, reducing closing ratios and raising rescission rates. Whatever brand equity there may have been is probably lost. What's a poor timeshare developer to do?

Draw Your Line in the Sand

Simply building a bigger castle in the sand will not a 'better brand build'. Considering the increasing cost for tours, the growing influence of the internet and the undeniable success of the brands, the old way of marketing is indeed broken. The trends are not likely to change -- so you must. It's time to brand your sand.

The most important consideration is to view your marketing in a different light. It is no longer simply the time between OPC and salesroom, but now stretches far back to the customer's living room and computer screen. Realize they are checking your qualifications well before you have a chance to check theirs. And that table where once the sale was made? . . . well it's been turned. The customer's decision when he signs on the line is no longer final. It's only final when he gets the needed reassurance of his friends back in the internet chat room.

The Sand Is Neither Flat Nor Equal

Brands like beauty are in the minds of the beholder and it is there where the marketing wars of the future will be won. The fighting is likely to be fierce and sharply divided down several lines.

Old Guard – those hotel brands that made the successful transition from simply lodging providers to resort destinations. Their legacy is both their strength and their weakness. Name familiarity has proven its value over the years, but can prove resistant to change or reinvention as the competition for the sand heats up.

An older hotel brand may not attract an active Gen-X couple the same as a youthful techno brand may. Their mature brand equity is their Achilles heel.

Large Independents – these well funded developers will hire the best brand consultants they can. Without a legacy from the past and an empty canvas, they will mold their brand around the customer. The sand is theirs to lose.

Smaller Operators and HOAs – they can be further grouped in two: the first, those that don't read or don't heed the brand warnings and those without the luxury to hire Madison Avenue consultants. If you're one of the latter, don't count yourself out. You can still be a brand in your own right, to your own members and to your guests. You don't have to be national to be successful. You only need to be the first that comes to mind in your market niche, your place in the sand. Here's a list of branding ideas to get you started:

1. Survey current members, guests and prospects in your target market. Get their impressions of whom and what you are. This will serve as your benchmark.
2. Compare this with the experience you hope to offer? Where, what and how can you improve?
3. Focus on differentiating yourself. It's about being distinct, not unusual. Deliver on your core strengths better and more consistent than the rest.
4. Monitor internet chat rooms and get involved to show you care.
5. Think like other great brand leaders in the industry. What would Hilton do, Conrad not Paris?
6. Write your brand plan of action with achievable milestones.
7. Rinse and repeat, comparing your progress and adjusting your plan.

For those of the first group, that choose not to brand their sand, those that are content to let sand alone – it's the sale bin for you. Sorry!

