

Who Defines You?

Pretty much every person and every organization in today's world is 'branded'. And that's not a necessarily 'bad' thing. It certainly shouldn't bring to mind a literal 'branding iron' nor even any form of 'body art' (tattoo). It should, however, help us all think from 'the same page' in terms of how we perceive/categorize one another on a regular basis. And just to be clear, this is NOT about a logo or tag line - it's about the 'brand' that actually defines who you and/or your organization is.

Typically we refer to or describe each other and/or our organizations in terms of human characteristics/attributes. Someone is friendly, easy to do business with, comfortable to be around, arrogant, condescending, rude, caring, businesslike, traditional, forward thinking, etc. Whatever the descriptor, often based on personal experience, it is usually a term that most everyone understands and about which one has a certain level of understanding. Sometimes, it is based on a particular stereotype or bias, rumour or innuendo, accepted generalization, or an outright lie. Whatever the case, whether intentional or by accident, these de facto 'brand descriptors' inevitably make an impression, and the more often they are heard and the more sources they come from, the more they become 'truth'. That's human nature.

In my experience, this may often happen without anyone giving much forethought to what perception may be delivered.

Case I in point: I am writing this from London, England. This morning, over coffee in a Starbucks on Kensington High Street, a young lady came to clear away the empty plates, cutlery, etc. There was no eye contact made, no conversation attempted (not even an "excuse me"), no attempt at any kind of interaction - her mission was to clear the table, period. The discussion that followed her departure focused on how 'typical' this type of 'service' is in the UK vs. North America. Was that a 'fair' assumption? Of course not. Perhaps she was having a 'bad day', perhaps she hadn't been properly trained in customer service skills; the same type of experience can (and does) happen in any number of places in North America, including Starbucks. Had the opportunity presented itself, the management folks at that particular Starbucks might have presented a totally different perspective, yet we defined the service, and indirectly the company, certainly the area of the planet, and the young lady, based on less than full disclosure. It's human nature.

Case II in point: I often write about and/or speak using my mom as an example. Typically I describe her as positive, a can-do person, happy, and somewhat irreverent. I've received many comments about how great a person my mom is, how wonderful it is that she's still around, and, in fact, my stories about mom have sometimes received more applause than I do at the end of a presentation. (No one will ever accuse me of not taking advantage of great material). Yet, as mom ages and becomes less of who she has always been, I now find myself sometimes thinking of her in more general terms often reserved for those who suffer from dementia as well as physical issues that are nowhere near 'positive, can-do, or happy'. It's human nature.

Case III in point: I recently sat next to a gentleman on a plane flying from Dallas to Houston. In the course of normal 'seatmate chatter' I learned he was a consultant and had a meeting the next day with a major oil and gas company. I shared that I too had a meeting with a (different) major oil and gas company. His immediate response was, "Do you want to trade." In his mind, apparently, his perception of the specific company he was to meet with was less than positive. My perception agreed with his (alleged), and my response was a quick and emphatic "No thanks!" Were our individual and perhaps collective perceptions correct? Certainly in our own minds they were. Objectively, however, I know we didn't talk long enough, nor did either one of us know everything there was to know about the organizations, for those perceptions/assumptions to be absolutely, 100% valid. Yet, within the context of 'seatmate chatter' it was not only acceptable, but also accepted without any additional comment. It's human nature.

Case IV in point: Political candidates and campaigns are . . . well, let's not even 'go there' . . . for this is an area where stereotypes, biases, rumour, innuendo, generalizations, and 'spin' feed our perceptions

and assumptions in ways we prefer not to admit. So, human nature being human nature . . . well, we won't go there!

If these examples are anywhere near representative of conversations that take place across the planet every day, then the question, in terms of leadership, is "How do you respond?" Do you allow others to define you and/or your organization? Or, what are the decisions you need to make to accept or change the perception others may have or communicate?

Leadership requires understanding that 'definitions', i.e. 'brands' are absolutely based on perception. The challenging part is that those perceptions are dependent on how one interacts with the person or the organization - what level, how often, for what reason, etc. Responding appropriately depends on sorting through those perceptions and capitalizing on the positive and the universal truths within the perceptions, versus reacting in a defensive manner.

Who defines you and your team, your organization, your place in the market? Is it the competition, the media, the 'outsiders', the front line, the customers/clients, the community? We all make choices about who we 'allow' to define who we are. Those choices can be positively influenced by understanding our own story and why it's appropriate; by influencing our internal team and external 'brand' with our story. The first step in defining YOU is to understand what your story is and why it makes a difference.

Aloha