



Capabilities

Clarity for a crowded world™

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Touchstones

Clarity

When you work with us, you'll learn we're obsessed with one question: how does your marketing help you achieve your business goals?

Whatever your answer, you want clarity, vision, direction, and that's where we can help. We can't run your business. But we can see. We can see beyond your problems, we can see what your customers want, what your competitors are delivering, and we can help you beat them in the marketplace. We build strategic brand and marketing programs. We give your customers and prospects a reason to come back, which gives you a lot of time to look ahead.

Making Less do More

Consider a problem we faced several years ago: the University of California, Berkeley Extension was in a bind: it had to grow, but it couldn't offer degrees, was short on faculty, and restricted by geography. (Read the University of California Berkeley Extension case study to see what we did.) Or another example: a four-branch community bank, no different from any of its eleven competitors and dwarfed by larger banks that owned most of its market area, wanted to cash in on its region's exponential growth. (You can find out what we did by reading the John Muir National Bank case study.)

These problems required thoughtful planning, research, analysis, intuition, creativity, and multiple integrated media deliveries. Their solutions were hugely successful, achieving results that dwarfed their investments and justified their risks. Why? Because they leveraged resources. They reached different audiences with different messages through different media, causing one to influence the other and in turn influence a third, creating a steam roller effect. We made less do more.

Principal



Fred Barson

As founder of the Napa Valley ad/pr agency, Barson/Armstrong, Fred helped put Crystal Geysers on the map, revive the Charles Krug and Weibel Vineyards wine brands, and supervise advertising and public relations for a number of community banks and tourist businesses. He left the agency to work in the emerging field of electronic and digital media. For six years, he developed corporate and marketing communications for such enterprises as Novell, the University of California Berkeley Extension, 3Com, Intel, Sun Microsystems, and Mass Mutual Life Insurance.

The dotcom boom took Fred client side. As head of communications for Financial Engines (named to Fortune's 1999 top-twelve list of "cool" companies), he created the company's voice and supervised content development across all media. He also launched the online financial advice service's brand identity.

Fred returned to the agency business when the boom went bust, joining the well known brand and graphic design firm, Triad. As C.O.O. he supervised brand and marketing strategies for Imperial Bank, Tier, and GE Financial Assurance as well as launching the Canadian AgriPlace portal and Silicon Valley wireless provider, ArrayCom.

Fred founded Blue Bolt to provide strategic branding and marketing for small and mid size companies. He also contributes his time to Taproot Foundation to help non profits organizations build brands and marketing programs, to the Marin Education Fund to move challenged youths into higher education, to the board of Hand in Hand to assist parents form strong relationships with their children, and to the Mission San Rafael Restoration.

Fred Barson has a Ph. D. in American literature from the University of Massachusetts. He is an award winning author, poet, and actor.

What We Do

Branding

Your most important asset, what your customers expect and experience when they do business with you. The value only you can bring to the marketplace, the reason consumers open their wallets and buy your products or services and not the other guy's.

And more than that: your guide to the future, what your business, your success is and always will be about: your brand.

We help companies discover, define, and develop their brands.

Integrated Marketing

The playing field is almost level. Because of unprecedented technical innovation over the last ten years, there are more, less expensive ways to communicate than ever before. Not only do you have better ways of finding customers, they have more ways of finding access to your products and services. That means when you integrate your marketing, you get more clout at less cost than ever before.

We help companies integrate their marketing in order to lower delivery costs, increase qualified leads, lower production costs, and increase revenue.

Special Ops

An educational testing service asks for ways to improve its channel marketing. An IT consultant wants to integrate sales and marketing so that it will develop better qualified leads. An ISP is looking for opportunities in the wireless market. In a large company, these are called initiatives, and they're usually developed by an inside SWAT team. In a small company, if they can't be addressed by a brochure, a trade ad, or a few press releases, they never see the light of day.

Here's a solution. A professional (or team of professionals) with industry savvy and business experience that's objective, flexible, and creative, that researches the issue, offers recommendations, and stays to help if necessary.

We help small and mid size companies develop and deliver special ops.

John Muir National Bank

Scenario

John Muir National Bank was one of eleven community banks operating in the mid eighties in California's northern Contra Costa County. Residential development was attracting upwardly mobile commuters whose primary banking relationships were with larger banks closer to their work. John Muir was looking for ways to tap into this emerging market.

Solution

Our research indicated people were moving to the area for good schools and housing, something the cities didn't have. This meant three things: John Muir had to appear to be one of the reasons they were moving; it had to stand out from its competition; and it had to be believable. Using a branch opening to launch a new identity – "A great neighbor. A great bank." – the bank raised awareness with an integrated campaign of transit, print, and direct response.

While the advertising raised awareness, public relations built credibility. By reaching out to local school districts and youth organizations with contributions of money, equipment, instructional and advisory time, the bank was quickly in touch with key community influencers – district superintendents, school principals, and government officials. As expected, the two campaigns leveraged one another, associating the bank with the community, raising its profile, and making both efforts credible. The work earned an award of merit for integrated marketing from the Financial Institutions Marketing Association.

Tier

Scenario

\$900 million, IT systems integrator Tier Technologies had pursued an aggressive acquisition strategy between 1995 and 2000, scooping up seventeen proprietary software companies, each that solved a critical process in one of four verticals: healthcare, insurance, financial services, and utilities. Then it wanted to consolidate its brand and move to the next level. It was asking:

How could it reposition from its identity as systems integrators to a new role as IT business consultants?

How could it retain the equity of each acquisition as they were gathered under one corporate brand?

Solution

Tier Technologies' core offering was to install and customize proprietary software used by governmental agencies to track and collect from "dead beat dads." Its acquisitions were based on the same business model – critical process software. They not only reinforced Tier's technical competence, they expanded its vertical reach to three other industries, supporting its technical expertise with equally expert consulting.

As a result, the consolidated brand did not have to explain more but less. We advised Tier to drop the word "Technologies" from its name. The company didn't have to remind customers what it could do but to inform everyone of its expanded, consulting expertise. Following stakeholder interviews and analysis, we developed a strategy and positioning expressed by the brand line, "Expect a Lot." The phrase conveyed confidence and superior performance, attributes the company and its acquisitions had always paid off. Finally, we implemented the strategy in a new identity that we extended to its web site, signage, and collateral. The market reacted with a spike in Tier's share price that returned its brand investment three-fold.

UC Berkeley Extension

Scenario

As the only self-supporting academic program sponsored by the University of California Berkeley, the growth of its Extension division – a provider of enrichment learning to post graduates – was stymied. It couldn't offer degrees, because that would put them in competition with the University itself. Extension also could not compete within geographic areas served by other UC Extensions, which limited its significant offerings in technology. Only one growth path seemed available: to extend course offerings to a sparsely populated section of northern California, served at the time by a state university, two community colleges, and several private colleges.

Solution

With its impressive faculty and proven curriculum, Berkeley Extension could enter new territory at a minimum cost. Yet because of the new territory's sparse population and existing service providers, the pool of prospective post secondary students was already well served by existing institutions. Instead of a costly battle for these students, then, we recommended Extension reach out to its competition. Because of the UC brand, existing competitors were eager to co-brand with it. They saw immediate benefits: to coordinate scheduling, share faculty and facilities and jointly sponsor special programs. Thus, by forming a coordinating council, the "Public Higher Education Partnership," Berkeley's Extension was able to gain entry into a new market at little cost and significant gain.

Weibel Vineyards

Scenario

Once famous for its Zsa Zsa Gabor campaign touting the winery's Green Hungarian varietal, by the early nineties Weibel had fallen on hard times. Its historic Mission San Jose vineyard was in the path of new housing. It was making too many different products, and it had neglected its distributor relationships. No amount of clever advertising was going to pull this brand off the shelves.

Solution

Weibel had to mend fences. The first step was to restore relations with the consumer press through a series of private tastings and tours. As the media became convinced the winery was still making good wine, they began to write stories about its rebirth. A second step was to push the family into a trade leadership role. Weibel had invested in Mendocino County vineyards to the extent they were the County's largest landowner. It was logical they champion a Mendocino County appellation through the Mendocino County Vintners Association. This and a campaign directed at trade press started to rebuild distributor relations. Finally by touting the winery's significant private label business and packaging innovations through trade publications, a picture of a sleeping giant began to emerge. The result of this three-pronged effort was a new legitimacy within the wine industry, strengthening distributor relationships and facilitating retail pull through. Weibel was back on its feet.

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