What a bad cup of coffee can teach you

Do you always start your day with a extra-big mugful of coffee like I do? If so, you'll appreciate just how terrible it is to start your day with a bad cup of coffee. A cup of coffee that lacks the delicious aroma of perfectly roasted coffee beans. A cup of coffee that just tastes awful.

A bad cup of coffee just gets your day off to a bad start, and for that I blame myself. You see, I had just finished a package of coffee and needed a replacement ASAP (it is a DEFCON 5 situation around here if there is no coffee). Normally, I buy my coffee at Trader Joe's but I had forgotten to do so during my weekly shopping trip. And so I found myself shopping in a gourmet store for something else, and thought I would pick up a brand of coffee that I enjoy (and for which I am willing to pay a little extra). Apparently, this store no longer carries that brand. They did have another brand that I have tried in the past, but I didn't feel like paying the gourmet store price for it.

So I made a very big mistake: I grabbed a bag of coffee simply because it was cheap. It was not a brand I knew or recognized or had even seen before, but I figured a bag of medium roast Costa Rican coffee from a gourmet store can't be all that bad. Well, I figured wrong. It was the worst coffee I have ever bought in my life. It tasted horrible. It had no coffee aroma. It was so bad I actually threw what was left out.

Then I hustled over to Trader Joe's and bought my go-to coffee. Now, my mornings are back to normal.

A bad cup of coffee taught me never to buy an unknown brand. And it's really not about the cost. You can get very good yet

cheap store-brand coffee like I do at Trader Joe's or at stores like Target, *where you trust the brand*.

Brands are quite literally markers that serve to identify. They let you separate one product from all the others like it. Once you've experienced a brand, you can then look for it if you liked it or avoid it if you didn't. *Brands provide a shortcut* that consumers can use to know what to buy quickly and without much research.

Remember this the next time you are out of coffee: Unless it's a brand you know already, buying just anything based on price alone will get your morning started on the wrong foot.

Do you know what your brand stands for? Are you communicating it well enough? If not, perhaps you should invest in my new Brand Identity Kit. Check it out!

The power of branding

I've had lots of occasion this past week to think about branding as I led writing groups for a business school class on marketing. The undergrads had to write a marketing paper dealing with some sort of marketing strategy. Most of them wrote about "brand extension," where a new product is introduced under the existing brand name. The students had a bit of trouble relating theory to real world practice, but if anyone doubts the power of marketing and branding, they should look no further than this article in yesterday's *Washington Post*. The article talks about how exposure to certain brands

(Coke is one of them) actually fires up areas in the brain that are also akin to RELIGIOUS experience. Why? Because marketers have spent years creating messaging that forms emotional connections for the brand. Of course, Coke is the prime example. I think it has the highest (here's another marketing term) brand equity of all brands. It logo is instantly recognizable, and they have had a particularly successful marketing campaign. When we think of Coke we may think "a Coke and a smile" or Santa or fuzzy bears or any number of campaigns designed to appeal to our emotions. The bottom line is that good marketing and branding do work to create positive associations.

Most everything that we are exposed to through the media has a (yet another marketing term) brand essence or personality. We associate certain behaviors/attributes/lifestyles/etc. to certain brands/products/people and countries? At least Howard Fineman of *Newsweek* seems to think that countries have brand personalities. And perhaps they do. However, he writes that Barack Obama is engaging in a branding exercise for the United States simply by the choices he's making for cabinet positions. Although I agree with the premise, I think Fineman is a bit sketchy on the details.

Bottom line: branding works. When something is not well known, it is because that something does not have a strong brand identity. Branding works for products (how many people out there have a preference Coke versus Pepsi versus store cola?) and it works for organizations. Apparently, branding also works for countries (let's see…England is traditional, some might say stodgy, Iran, more apt to incite violence, New Zealand has lots of dairy…).

The branding that goes beyond

We may tend to think of branding as limited to logos, ads, boilerplates in press releases, corporate identity kits that define colors on websites, or any number of marketing tools that are used to create a cohesive image. Of course, that is the part of branding that a marketing communications person would be involved with. But there is a part of branding that is more elusive but I think as important: the front lines of your organization or company. What do I mean by front lines? I mean the first impression that your company gives a visitor when he or she is visiting in person. The front line is the receptionist, the waiting area or lobby, the building, the office, whatever the visitor sees first. You can learn a lot about a company from observing this space. Recently, I went to an office where the receptionist greeted me coldly, the waiting area was cold in feel and by design. It was all marble, with nary a magazine or any other reading material in sight. There company logo had a cold, stark look to it. In short, it was not very welcoming. I sat there (because the person I was waiting for was running late…another bad impression) and thought about what they were trying to convey. Perhaps they were aiming for efficiency? Or they didn't want anyone to linger? Or most likely, they did not give a thought to the image they are giving off. In my experience, this is a very weak link in most organizations' image creation "plans." Last year, I had a client that was trying to promote high end, expensive products. You would think that the store would be rich and comfortable. it was not. I tried to convince the client that no matter how brilliant our marketing plan was, potential customers would be turned off when walking in to the store. In other words, we could get people there but we couldn't make people buy. It would be in lots of companies' best interest to take a tour of their reception areas with new eyes. Is the receptionist courteous? Presenting the company image (whatever that may be—professional or casual)? How would

a visitor feel in the waiting area? How do you look to an outsider? Is that look in line with your mission/vision?

First impressions count, right?

Getting religious about branding

Seriously. This isn't about working all night on the re-branding project, it's about what certain words connote in a religious context. Apparently, the Alexandria. VA-based Baptist Temple was suffering from dwindling membership. What did they resolve to do? Hold a membership drive? No! Re-brand the church. See, apparently the name "Baptist Temple" carries bad or unclear connotations. Baptist is tied to the far right conservative movement, and this church is progressive. And temple? Well, apparently that made this place sound hippy-dippy. So, they pastor begged his flock to rename the church and the new name is…Commonwealth Baptist Church. They didn't stop there. With true branding and marketing savvy, they will add a tagline, which has not been chosen yet but may be something like "A Progressive Community of Faith."

Read the whole Washington Post article for more information. This is such a great example of how a name can make all the difference. It goes back to what I was saying before about perception. I find it interesting that the pastor in this church thought that by changing their name, they would literally save their church. I will be interested to see if it does make a difference.