

Managing tech-driven brands in the tech-driven era

A quick scan through recent news articles and there's a recurring theme. Kenny the robot is being trained to clean up after you. Google is funding 'robot journalism' to help produce 30,000 local stories. Ultimately, will AI kill or save humankind?

Like it or not, technology is thundering down the line. Its purpose is to make life easier, but it often confuses and complicates. And in the case of AI, it's unsettling for people who fear they'll be replaced by robots.

If you're a business technology brand that's evolved over the last twenty or so years, the last two years will have felt faster and more challenging than ever. The bad news is that's the new reality. Life is pretty hectic and unsettling, meaning how you articulate who you are and what you do is even more critical. There are many challenges to getting your brand right in this environment. Here are some of the answers to the challenges our clients face.



1

Brand positioning: It is possible to fix a position in a landscape of continual change

It's a cliché, but change is the new constant. Not only that, the waves of change are bigger and closer together, making the future more uncertain. Hardware has become commoditised, and companies are looking for higher revenue-generating services and solutions. The market is converging as new and established companies enter with similar propositions, albeit from different specialisms.

It's little wonder that trying to define a brand for the next three years seems impossible when you don't know what the next three months look like? Imagine if you're the customer faced with this? Here's the rub – defining a brand that helps your customers navigate and make sense of change, and not worrying about the impact of change on you. There's nothing you can do about what you don't know, other than adopt a firm position, embrace the uncertainty, and go with it. It's about explaining how you will make life easier, better or more productive for your customers. It means you might have to be a little more agile than you're used to. Like any brand, you'll need to tinker under the bonnet to remain relevant, but perhaps more frequently than you're used to.

The key is not letting the naysayers, sluggish internal structures or legacy systems dent your ambition. It's about being bold – leveraging the most innovative parts of your business and dialling up those attributes. If the net result is that you manage to nudge the rest of the company in the same direction, so much the better.

Of course, your C-suite needs to support and contribute to the new brand strategy. Part of this is acknowledging the reality that technological innovation relies on partnering with brands who may traditionally have been competitors. So, in defining your brand, you should not only be clear about the benefit to your customer, but also the distinctive role you play whilst sitting alongside your potential partners.

2

Visual and verbal identity: It will help if you adopt an unexpected language

Generally speaking, the business-to-business tech sector isn't great at brand communication. It's a very noisy market, and for technology that has such a transformative impact on people and society, it looks and sounds pretty dull and uninspiring. You can understand why. The product or solution is undoubtedly complex. It's taken many months to develop, test and refine to get to market. It's been designed by a team of very gifted technical experts who know their subject matter inside out, and who could tell you all about the detail. Which is great if you're talking to the head of IT. But if you're trying to sell the idea to a company, then most people will want it explained in very simple, human terms. They won't necessarily understand, or be interested in, the complex technical language, no matter how brilliant or innovative it is. The difficulty from a communication perspective is making the technical experts feel comfortable to step back from the detail, and ignoring how the rest of the sector communicates.

Selling the idea means using simple, non-technical language to explain how you make peoples' lives better. Visually it means avoiding cold, corporate stock photography; steering away from a Minority Report pastiche of people touching screens; illuminated dots and lines implying connections; kit; binary codes flowing into the distance. Technology doesn't need to look like masculine science fiction. It can be warm, inviting and above all human. After all, it's designed to serve people, so people should be at the heart of it. Be brave, exciting and single-minded, and adopt an unexpected language.



3

Thought leadership: Ensure you are credible by having something credible to say

We're entering a new era of change, driven by technology. The future is unknown. We don't know what it will look like or who will have led us there. Companies are vying to be the ones, either on their own, through partnerships or through merging into entirely new entities. Everyone has a point of view and claims to be an expert. It's a complex and confusing picture and customers need help making sense of it.

Regardless of whether you're a leader, or not, it's important to have something meaningful and credible to say. In other words, thought leadership.

Given brands should help customers through the complex market and uncertain future, it makes sense that thought leadership should focus on the opportunity rather than the technological advancement itself - people want to know what technology will do for them.

Thought leadership should paint an informed picture of the future. It doesn't have to be your view alone. Gather thoughts from a range of commentators, experts or academics - economic, social, political, technological etc. Your brand can build credibility by curating this well-informed picture. Just because the thinking might be generated from the world of academia, doesn't mean it can't be accessible to the majority. The same rule of communicating in simple human terms applies here too.

Of course, highlighting a market opportunity paves the way to subtly introduce technical innovations you have, as well as boosting your credibility.





4

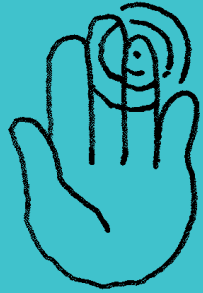
Employee engagement: The impact on your people is great, but the importance of their role is greater

Adapting to the new world order not only means thinking how your communication supports your ambition, but also how your culture and your people support it. Technology is designed to help people perform tasks more effectively.

For hardware manufacturers moving upstream into consultancy and solutions, that means having a very different approach to selling and servicing clients. Training current employees and complementing their skills through recruitment becomes a priority. For all, it means continually thinking about the right mix of people to push you forward as the unknown unfolds. Therefore, you need to think about your employer brand; what you expect of employees and what you'll give them in return. Apart from setting expectations, it will ensure you present yourself as an attractive proposition for talent in a very competitive recruitment market.

The march of technology also means you'll require more from your people, not less. The companies that thrive will be the ones that have genuinely embraced a culture of innovation. A place where innovation is central to progress and part of the corporate strategy, where it's invested in and supported from the top down, and where everyone is actively encouraged to contribute. Indeed, a recent survey found 41% of professionals felt they had little or no impact on their company's broader mission, leading to 65% of those with powerful ideas preferring to pursue them elsewhere rather than internally.

Creating this culture isn't some lip service nod to innovation through the occasional initiative of inviting your people to attend the odd brainstorm. This is about a fundamental and systematic way of doing business. A managed and owned process that's part and parcel of who you are. Feed this into your employer brand, and you become a more serious and attractive technology brand and proposition for talent.



5

Marketing communication: You can help remove the anxieties by taking a lead in addressing them

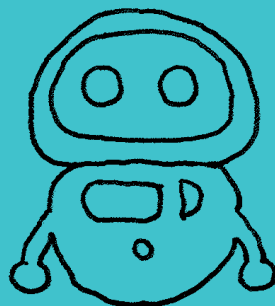
Technology is full of hope and anxiety. Companies that rely completely on brainpower and guesswork and don't invest in technology will be left behind. By the same token, the brands that lean too heavily on automation and fail to make real connections with people will be overlooked.

One of the biggest fears of artificial intelligence is how it will replace peoples' roles. There are different views surrounding this, however, AI already exists in everyday life. Think Siri or Alexa; think about speech recognition used for security screening in telephone banking; advancements in predictive texting or online customer service chats. AI is already performing mundane and repetitive tasks, but rather than replacing people, the goal must be to work with and complement roles. Tasks may adapt and evolve, but at the end of the day, service is a human thing, even if it's enhanced by technology. People will still want to discuss matters relevant to them with a person rather than a robot. The power of human empathy and emotion will always prevail. Imagine visiting a doctor. Technology may help make a more accurate and consistent diagnosis, but delivering the news, the recommended treatment and the options available would be totally inhumane if delivered by anything other than a doctor.

As we enter the unknown, the biggest societal challenge is having the confidence to trust technology. For brands this means helping mitigate those fears and anxieties. Corporate citizenship becomes more important. To win respect (and with this, success), brands must take a lead in communicating how technology will change the way we work and live. Far from depicting a brave new world, marketing communication must be realistic, honest and balanced. Above all, forthcoming. Apart from making good business sense, there's a moral obligation.

Technology is changing how we live and work. Companies that want to win need to re-think the role of their brand and their communications.

They need to take a step back from the detail and complexity and think more about how their technology will help customers. Brands should be brave and avoid sector stereotypes, and build credibility by gathering and sharing views about the future. Companies must take their people with them on the journey into the unknown, as making the future real will rely on them. Brands must also be seen to be leading the way in communicating the impact of technology on society.



Technology is changing how we work, rest and play, so how better to think about your brand than with the enclosed Mars bar. And when you have a moment, feel free to drop us a line and let us know when we can have a more meaningful conversation about helping you manage your brand in this tech-driven era.



Michael Coleman

D +44 (0) 20 7833 6444
M +44 (0)7968 902 310
m.coleman@frankbrightabel.com

Frank, Bright & Abel

326 City Road
London EC1V 2PT
T +44 (0)20 7833 6430
www.frankbrightabel.com

Frank, Bright & Abel is a creative communications consultancy, providing strategy, design and delivery to business-to-business, financial services and higher education.