

The prescription for performance: Our brand, our future

by MARK BRESLIN

"IF YOU HAVE an erection lasting more than four hours, contact your physician immediately."

Unless you've been living under a rock, those words are familiar to you and millions of other Americans as part of the marketing and advertising associated with various medications. In fact, it is part of a disclaimer about the potential downside of using them. As a business strategist and (thankfully) a guy not yet using those products, I want to buy a beer for the genius who coined that phrase. That simple sentence summarizes brand identity and client fulfillment in ways that we can only imagine for union construction.

What makes people buy any brand? First and foremost, it is their confidence in the value proposition. What you provide will not sell unless that value is replicated in the mind of the buyer. For purposes of this article, I take the position that the "union construction" brand is at a

minimum tarnished and, at worst, completely broken. There is a profound lack of confidence in the union value proposition and a mass amount of negativity and misunderstanding in the marketplace.

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As well, the turmoil surrounding non-construction unions is also negatively impacting the brand. The general perception of the owner community (from residential to mega-industrial projects) is "excessive cost and complications for above-average value." Simply put, the brand identity of the last 30 years has been more about the "serious side effects" of using union construction rather than the significant benefits and value of a very sophisticated, if imperfect, business model.

On to our branding lesson. The amazing beauty of the "four-hour warning" noted above is that it takes a significant negative attribute and turns it into a positive. Just think about it. If you did have that "get-it-going" challenge, how upset are you going to be with an "over-performance"



problem? You are no longer questioning cost; you just want to know where to get it. If a four-hour "cure" is the worst thing that you have to worry about, my only question is, where the hell do I sign up?

The lesson is simple: over-performance is not a bad thing for your brand. What would union construction's over-performance warnings sound like? Try these:

- Projects may be completed early, resulting in unanticipated positive beneficial use
- Productivity may exceed all expectations and create excessive profits

- Cooperation, coordination and communication may result in significant decreases in blood pressure
- Jobs may be too safe and result in lower insurance costs.

The Building & Construction Trades Department, the individual building trades unions and many major contractor associations are engaged in serious efforts to improve the union construction brand. Union leaders are spending more time with owners and end-users than in the past. Everyone across the industry understands that without a brand

advantage, there is no way to compete with lower-cost competitors.

The quantum leap that every reader of this article needs to fully understand is that the universal brand advantage of union construction depends on three things:

1. Creation of economic and operational value in excess of and superior to the competition
2. Consistency in delivery and in meeting client needs, especially at the construction site
3. A market-centric approach to the brand and its price, positioning and promotion

It is on the last point that I want to place the greatest emphasis. The market endorsement of our brand will decide our economic fate. What we think or want is totally irrelevant. A myopic approach that puts self interest before market interest guarantees failure. A limited horizon view or economic formula that places self needs over client needs guarantees market share erosion. A market promise of "higher value for higher cost" that is broken is a promise best not made at all. The future rides on what the clients and the market decide. The illusion that it is any different will lead us down the road to oblivion.

Every single stakeholder providing "union construction services," including every craft worker, must understand that you are either contributing to the significant improvement of our brand or you are responsible for its demise. There is no in-between. Over-performance needs to become the norm. There is no magic blue pill to save us. Here is what the warning label says to us: addressing dysfunction and underperformance is a challenge that must be faced now. ■

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author who focuses on improving organizational performance, leadership and work ethic. Known for his blunt and uncompromising style, he has addressed more than 500 audiences and well over 200,000 leaders, managers and craft workers. He is the author of Survival of the Fittest, Million Dollar Blue Collar and Alpha Dog: Leading, Managing & Motivating in the Construction Industry.

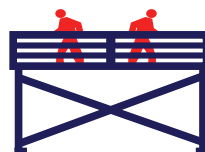


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