

# **Strategy #4**

## **Branding and Marketing**

### **Your Relationship**

*"You can't blow an uncertain trumpet."*

—Fr. Theodore Hesburgh,  
former President, University of Notre Dame

#### **Chapter Objectives:**

1. Learn what a relationship brand is and why it is important.
2. Have fun finding the brand logo or symbol that you both can agree on.
3. Discover how and why to market your relationship brand to family and friends.

## **Who “we” are!**

Relationships have two faces: a private one and a public one. It is not uncommon for those faces to be different and even divisive, but it is unfortunate. The bigger the gap between the two faces, the bigger the risks to the long-term sustainability of the relationship. While there are certain aspects of any live-in relationship that are best kept private, it is critical that both the internal and external faces of the relationship be based on a common vision and objectives that collectively identify the relationship “brand.”

The biggest benefit of branding and marketing your relationship is that it ensures that whenever you or your partner describe the relationship to others, you are both drawing from the same vision, values, and attitudes about the relationship. This strengthens the psychological bond, fortifies the emotional commitment, and adds to the level of intimacy each of you feels toward the other.

One of the biggest problems for cohabitating couples occurs when they are not unified in their relationship “brand,” so that they seem to be describing two very different relationships. In this chapter, we will discuss developing a unified “brand” for your relationship and the importance of consistently marketing it to your family and friends who may be sitting in judgment or even condemnation of your “living in sin!”

A critical element for success in any business is for it to have a very clear sense of its identity—what it stands for, the emotional relationship it hopes to establish with its customers—and an ability to market that sense of identity to the world. This means going beyond the company’s vision and objectives to formulate a brand that fits the business philosophically and typically conjures up an emotional response and connection for the customer.

Nike, Coke, Apple, Mercedes, and Harley-Davidson are some of the most recognized brands in the world. When you see any of these company

logos, they cause an immediate emotional response and, whether your reaction is positive or negative, you feel it right away. You get a clear sense of what Mercedes and Apple stand for from the marketing of those logos and the concepts of who they are as a company. A brand is simply a symbol of that identity—a reminder of your emotional relationship with the company behind the logo.

An example from my consulting work with a law firm provides insight into the role and significance of relationship branding. A colleague and I were helping a law firm build a strategic plan that included a marketing program. These were personal injury lawyers who had a hard time breaking out of the stereotypical image of ambulance chasers. My colleague was a brand specialist, and he gave the partners of the firm an assignment using magazines and newspapers, scissors, some glue, and poster board. He told them to cut out the images that portrayed what they did not want to be, as well as the images of what they did want to be as a firm. It ended up being a fascinating exercise for them. They took those “anti-images” (an ad with an overweight guy in a Hawaiian shirt holding a martini and smoking a big cigar, and surrounded by voluptuous women in bikinis around a hotel pool in Las Vegas) and glued them onto one big piece of poster board.

On the other poster board was, among other more positive images, a picture of a lion’s head with a strong and confident look on its face, which the partners saw as reflecting integrity and the courage to do battle if need be. That lion’s head ended up as a symbol of their brand, and it became the logo for the firm. The firm uses these poster board images of what they do and do not want to be to make sure they are still on the right path. That is an example of a brand logo: a symbol that conjures up emotions, values, or beliefs of what you stand for and want others to know about your brand.

Branding a relationship means that you both work to find a symbol, a logo, that represents what you, the partners, see as the essence of

your relationship. As you might have guessed, I'm going to ask you to do the same exercise as the attorneys in the law firm. Make it a fun event some evening, and while it may seem silly at first, it can be a powerful way to create a brand logo of who you are as a cohabitating couple. Work together to go through magazines, newspapers, or the Internet to collect images of what your relationship is and what it is not.

Try to agree on one or two images that may work in unison with each other. If you really do not agree on an image, take more time to discuss it. Or, if you find nothing in any of these sources, maybe one of you could design a new image encompassing both of your ideas. It can even be a newly created symbol, but just make sure that the symbol gives both of you a sense of meaning and reminds you of the essence of your relationship whenever you see it. In addition, even consider identifying a song that supports your brand and will further identify your relationship. Intel, the giant computer microchip maker, has done a great job of linking a familiar four-part tone in all their commercials to their brand. Anytime we hear the familiar tone in a commercial, most of us will immediately think of Intel. Beethoven's Ode to Joy was played at our wedding, and our son and daughter-in-law had it played for us as we walked down the aisle at their wedding. Whenever Charlotte or I hear that music, we have a rush of warm emotions.

Keep the poster boards, unified symbol, or a version of the song so you can revisit these images at your annual retreat that will be discussed later, and make sure that you, too, use your brand to stay on the path to a world-class relationship.

### **Marketing your relationship's brand**

So, you've found or created a brand logo that represents who you are as a couple. Now, it is time to let others know what your relationship is

all about. In the business world, it is about marketing your brand. But why do you need to market something so intimate to the people in your lives, you ask? First, let's take a brief look at why businesses market their brand images.

Companies typically market to sell more products and services. In addition, companies market their brand for other reasons: they market to keep loyal customers, to stay ahead of their competition, to sell more to existing customers, to attract employees, and even to attract other organizations who want to work in partnership with them. In other words, companies need stakeholders, partners, and friends who believe in what they do and who want to associate with them.

In a relationship, while you have each other, it is also normal and healthy to spend time with family and friends. Even though you clearly have no product or service to sell, one key benefit of developing and marketing your relationship brand is that you are likely to attract other like-minded couples. This both reinforces the relationship that you have and helps you to learn from the relationships of others by "benchmarking" your relationship with those around you.

This simply means that you use the relationships of others as a point of reference to determine the health of your relationship. It is hard enough to find good examples of positive and productive relationships anywhere in our society. So anytime that you can learn the "best practices" of other healthy couples through comparative benchmarking, you enhance the return on your investment in developing and marketing your relationship brand.

If you and your partner are ever in a social situation with other couples and you find yourself uncomfortable with the nature of the interactions and behavior of other couples, be sure to discuss your emotional reaction later in private. It is not that you will gossip about or judge others;

instead, it is an excellent opportunity to do comparative benchmarking by recognizing what you do or don't want in your relationship. On the other hand, perhaps you may feel a bit envious because you see something modeled by another couple that you would like to have more of in your relationship. Be sure to talk about it as well and consider it a great opportunity to learn how to strengthen your relationship by learning from the best practices modeled by other couples.

There's another reason to do relationship brand marketing. It is my belief that if you don't give people a positive perception of who you are as a couple, they will make one up for themselves and categorize you in a way that might be negative and/or unwanted. This will be especially true for a couple who are "only" living together. As mentioned, all relationships have different faces, and people see only the face that you show them. Sometimes the opinions others form about you as a couple can be harmful to your relationship.

Take, for example, the stereotypical situation with the parents. Do you ever go to dinner with your or your partner's parents, and one of them takes your partner's side on every issue and you feel constant pressure to get married? Or worse, they pick on your partner for cohabitating and never give him or her any support? Why is that? It is possibly because the parents don't see you as a cohesive couple with a united front and are secretly or openly trying to drive you apart. In fact, these episodes with the parents may cause you to fight all the way home, becoming exactly as the relatives see you: divided against each other. It can be a self-fulfilling prophecy when people emphasize a certain image of you, and that certainly holds true for a couple too. If your friends take you and your partner's playful banter as true fighting, they may egg you on at every gathering or party, which can escalate to real arguments that in time may start to weaken your

relationship, so they can feel justified in their judgment of your “sinful” relationship.

Purposely marketing a unified brand of who you are as a couple will let the people you spend time with know the brand of your relationship and how you want to be viewed. Now, this doesn’t mean that you can’t be yourselves and continue that playful banter. But once in a while, one of you can say something like, “One thing I love about Gina is that she likes to tease me as much as I love to tease her. We are both very playful that way.”

I’m not suggesting you and your partner be people you are not. It’s quite the opposite. I am asking you to know who you are as a couple—your brand—and to market it appropriately as a key strategy toward continually strengthening your live-in relationship. Nike, Coke and McDonalds continually market their brands to reinforce the image of who they are and what they stand for. You and your partner should continually market your brand to ensure those around you know what you stand for as a couple and that you are not living together simply because your relationship is too shallow to support something more permanent.

### **The united front**

Parents often talk about the importance of presenting a united front when dealing with their children. Of course, this doesn’t mean you are clones of one another, but it does mean you both set the rules and enforce them with similar, agreed-upon methods. If parents don’t form a united front, the kids may see the differences as vulnerabilities and use them against the parents. It’s no different with friends and family.

Pick out those qualities or values from your brand that you most want to put forth. No matter what your partner says to other people about you, always make sure that they know you support each other. No matter what your partner forgets to do or how frustrated you or others can get, let

others know you are with your partner all the way. While venting your irritation about your partner to a close friend, it's a good idea to add something like, "Oh well, it's a good thing we share the same vision and values; it helps me get past the occasional little disagreements quickly." Live the brand!

In business, it's sometimes mentioned that you should have an "elevator speech" for what you do—meaning a quick description of what you do for a living that you can give in just a few moments. When you meet someone on an elevator who says, "What do you do for XYZ Corporation?" it's good to have a well-thought-out and crisp answer ready. The same goes for your relationship. When someone asks, "So you've been living together for two years now, huh? How's it going?" It's good to have a genuine answer that reaffirms your feelings about the relationship, "I've found my best friend and moved in with him, and we just keep getting better every day!" It is like having a tag line for your relationship just like the corporate brands.

As a counterbalance to the chronically high failure rate of intimate relationships, consider becoming much more purposeful in the care and nurturing of the most important relationship in your life. Discovering or developing your authentic relationship brand and marketing it consistently can be a powerful tool to help keep you both well connected... and make the relationship world-class regardless of whether you are getting married or plan to live together forever.

This is a chance for you to feel more in charge of your relationship's destiny. To take relationship brand marketing one step further, consider creating your own MySpace page since it is so easy to do. It's the place where you post pictures or notices of your partnership or planned events and market your brand to the world. Write quarterly e-newsletters to all of your family and friends that reinforce the brand images of who you are as a couple. Building a world-class relationship means you need to do things

differently to make your relationship successful. Developing and marketing a relationship brand is certainly outside-the-box thinking! Besides, it will really surprise all those critics who are just waiting for your relationship to fall apart.

### Steps to developing a relationship brand

1. Go through magazines, newspapers, or the Internet together to find pictures, symbols, or images of what your relationship *is* and what it *is not*. Try to agree on one or two images that may work in unison. Cut out or print out your images and paste them on a poster board.
  2. If you find nothing in any of those sources, maybe one of you could design a new image encompassing both of your ideas. Just make sure that your newly created symbol gives both of you a sense of meaning and reminds you of the essence of your relationship whenever you see it.
  3. In addition, consider identifying a song that supports your brand and will further symbolize your relationship. Even consider creating your own online presence to post pictures or notices about the relationship or planned events, and to market your brand to the world. Write quarterly e-newsletters to all of your family and friends that reinforce the brand images of who you are as a couple.
  4. Keep the poster board of symbols, or a version of the song or website, so you can revisit these at your annual retreat, which will be discussed later in this book.
  5. Consider writing a relationship “tagline” just like major corporations—just a few genuine words that reaffirm your feelings about the relationship. Example: “I’ve found my best friend, moved in with him, and we just keep getting better every day!”
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### Chapter Highlights:

- Understanding what a relationship brand is, why you need one, and how to live the brand
- Identifying and agreeing on your specific relationship brand image, symbol, or song
- Using the brand to market who you are as a couple to your family and friends