

BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

Your personal core values determine your store's core values; know them, live by them, and your business will thrive

BY PHILIP C. WRZESINSKI

Walmart ran an ad in the May 2005 issue of *Vogue*. Stop and think about that for one second. Walmart and *Vogue* are the unlikelyst of partners. Yet there was Walmart trying to commoditize the fashion industry the way it had commoditized the grocery industry over the previous decade. It didn't work.

By November 2006 Walmart was facing declining sales for the first time in more than a decade. No matter how many ads Walmart ran in *Vogue*, no one was going to think of Walmart for fashion. Its advertising didn't match its reputation. More important, its advertising couldn't change its reputation.

Walmart dropped the fashion line in 2007 and went back to what it does best—sell cheap stuff. By 2008, it was back on track with advertising and offerings in line with its reputation and core values. Walmart lost its way when it tried to be something it wasn't. Only by returning to what it was could it find success.

Walt Disney understood this. He knew that if he wanted to control the Disney brand, he had to make sure every single element of Disney was perfectly aligned with his vision and the feelings he wanted his customers to have. He built tunnels underneath his theme park

so that visitors would never see the real-world operations.

In fact, all of the iconic brands and businesses found that their growth began when their entire business was in perfect alignment with their core values, their reputation, their brand.

Most people think of branding as being some external concept created by a marketing wiz that includes colors, logos and slogans. The reality is that branding is much more internal and all-encompassing.

It's not something created separate from your company, but something that your company represents in all you do.

Roy H. Williams, aka The Wizard of Ads, once said: "Branding is every single interaction a customer has with your business, plus how they feel about that interaction." These feelings and emotions are key. These feelings are your brand. If customers think your store is dark and dirty, that is your brand. If they think your store is friendly and welcoming, that is your brand.

Walt Disney designed every element of his original park to control customers' feelings. Steve Jobs at Apple designed every product with one goal—not to make the best product, but to make the most loved product. Control the feelings.

How do you control the feelings of your customers? You have to know your core values.

CORE VALUES

When I say core values, I mean you, the boss. What's important to you is where you will put your focus. Your store's core values will always line up with your personal core values. If you're a fun-loving guy who likes to goof off, you'll have a fun-loving store that likes to goof off. If you're a disciplinarian, your store will run like a well-oiled machine. If you're friendly and caring, you won't tolerate rudeness from your staff. If you're a product genius, you'll surround yourself with other knowledgeable peo-

ple. Your core values are your business's core values.

Famed psychologist Carl Rogers once said: "Who you are is good enough, if only you would be it openly." In business, that means be your core values more openly. Find the traits that define you, then align everything about your store with those traits. Not only will your business be more attractive to people who share those traits, you'll enjoy your business more because it will feel comfortable. It will fit.

How do you find your core values? Start with all the words people have used to describe you over the years. Ask your best friends to use three or four words to describe you. Jot them down. Get as many words as possible and then pick the three or four you think fit best. Don't worry if they don't all line up with each other. Don't worry if they might have a negative connotation. Find the words that fit best.

David S. Freeman teaches a screenwriting class twice a year, in New York and Los Angeles. His students have written award-winning movies like *Good Will Hunting*, *Lost in Translation* and *Mr. Holland's Opus*. His students have written television shows such as *ER*, *The Simpsons* and *Cheers*. David figured out a long time ago that what made a character in a movie or TV show great was the consistency with which their character traits were shown in each scene of the movie. He says the best, most-loved characters had only three or four traits. Characters with two traits were dull and flat. Characters with six or more traits were too confusing. The sweet spot was three or four.

The same applies to your business. Identify your three or four traits and then make sure every aspect of your business shows those traits.

On my own journey to this discovery I found that my core values are Having Fun, Helping Others, Educational and Nostalgic. I made sure everything in my toy and hobby store showed those values:

Fun? We had dozens of toy demos out for customers to try.

Helpful? We offered every service we could imagine including free gift-wrapping, layaway, delivery and assembly. We carried heavy stuff out to their cars.

Educational? We offered classes to teach them how to shop for products or how to use the products they owned.

Nostalgic? With our baby department we were there for new babies, birthdays and Christmas—three of the four most nostalgic moments in people's lives.

We made sure every element of our store matched our values—including fun facts posted in the bathroom, whimsical messages on the answering machine, and even a baby-changing area stocked with diapers and wipes.

APPLYING YOUR CORE VALUES

Simon Sinek, in his famous "Start with Why" TEDx speech, said: "The goal is to do business with people who believe what you believe." When you know your core values and learn to be them more openly, people who share your values become attracted to your business.

You need to show your core values in your advertising and on your website. Instead of the usual history of the store that most people use on their About Us page, start with a We Believe section. Tell people what you believe and those who share your beliefs will be in to shop. Instead of the typical we're having-a-sale type of advertising, tell a story that shows your core values in action. In 2005, I ran this radio ad as our entire Christmas campaign:

"He left Detroit, 9 am Christmas Eve. Some store somewhere had to have the one toy his sweet little 6-year-old wanted. Six cities, seven stores later he stood travel-weary across the counter from me. 'I suppose you don't have any Simon games either.' As I handed over the last of my Simon games he smiled and said, 'God bless you!' Believe me, he already has. Merry Christmas from Toy House in downtown Jackson. We're here to make you smile."

That ad created the best Christmas season ever. We ran it again in 2007 and smashed our 2005 results by a wide margin. What made the ad so powerful? It didn't mention our hours. It didn't mention our website or address. It spoke to the heart in the language of nostalgia and made people feel something. Feelings and emotions move the needle.

CORE VALUES AND HIRING

Unless you're the sole employee, you often put your store's brand in the hands of your employees. The best way to ensure that your employees stay on message is to hire

IF CUSTOMERS THINK YOUR STORE IS DARK AND DIRTY, THAT IS YOUR BRAND. IF THEY THINK YOUR STORE IS FRIENDLY AND WELCOMING, THAT IS YOUR BRAND.

people who share your values. Simon Sinek also said: "If you hire people just because they can do a job, they'll work for your money. But if they believe what you believe, they'll work for you with blood and sweat and tears."

Finding people who believe what you believe isn't as hard as it seems.

First, when you write your classified, forget about the job duties. Write instead about the kind of person you want to hire.

For instance, when I placed ads they would say things like, "Do you love helping people solve problems? Are you someone who likes to learn new skills and then teach those skills to others? Does Christmas mean something special? Does the bell still ring for you? Toy House is looking for some fun-loving people."

Second, write down questions that help you identify someone's core values. My favorite questions always began with "Tell me about a time when ..." Actions speak louder than words. You'll learn more in two or three stories than you ever can with standard questions about their goals or desires or who they think they are.

Employees who share your traits will be easier to train, more likely to stay, and will help you create and keep a culture perfectly aligned with your core values.

Knowing your core values is the most important step for building a business designed for long-term success. Once you align every aspect of your business—from operations to marketing and advertising to hiring and training—with your core values, you will control your reputation and your brand. You will be yourself more openly, and, as Carl Rogers said, that will be good enough.

Philip C. Wrzesinski is the former owner of Toy House and Baby Too in Jackson, Mich., named one of "The 25 best independent stores in America" by George Whalin in his book *Retail Superstars* (Penguin 2009). Now Phil takes the lessons he learned in a lifetime of retail to help other independent retailers and small businesses find their success. Web: www.PhilsForum.com.

This article was adapted from Phil's keynote address at the 2017 NRHSA Table Top Expo in Las Vegas.



© Sentavio | Dreamstime.com