Can Coldwell Banker and Century 21 deliver on their new brand promises?

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As you might have noticed, the past few days here on Notorious (Rob Hahn's blog The Notorious R.O.B.) have been a touch heavy. So, today, let's get into big broker branding.

Can we spend a little bit of time congratulating two brands that are doing things right? At least, two brands who have made a strong first step? Coldwell Banker and Century 21 both have scored big with their most recent moves, and it's worth talking about them, at least a little bit, to recognize when someone does something right in our industry.

To make it useful for those who aren't going to get caught up in celebrating other people's brands, we'll add some thoughts on branding in general.

Let's do a little sunshine and happy today, for a change of pace.

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Coldwell Banker drains a trey from downtown

I put this on Facebook as well, but look, Coldwell Banker’s latest commercial called “Hoops” is a legitimately great commercial. If you haven’t seen it yet, you can watch the longer 60-second version here:

Now, CB has done quite a few of these “touch the heart” type of campaigns in the past, most notably its Adopt-A-Pet related commercial. But this one is better, for a lot of reasons.

First, it goes directly to the heart of what a Realtor does: helps a family cope with a disruptive transition. Because that’s what moving is. It’s disruptive as hell, painful as hell, and frankly,

nobody likes to move — even if they're glad they moved after the fact. (Ask me how I know.)

Second, you have the sullen, pissed-off kid. Far too many commercials and ads in real estate seem to feature these uber-happy families with perfect kids and perfect moms and dads who are just *so thrilled* to be buying a house! That's just not reality, as we all know.

If moving sucks for grownups, it sucks even more for a kid who has to leave all his friends and think about having to make new friends.

(Granted, this is a pretty perfect made-for-TV family, but well, you can only do so much in a 60-second commercial.)

Third, I didn't do a timer count, but at least half of the commercial is about the kid and his new friends and his family. The agent is nowhere to be seen. That's the right touch here.

After the voiceover says, "Our agents don't just understand real estate; they understand what home is all about," there's no need to pat yourself on the back anymore. There's no need to keep featuring the agent. CB could have gone down the road of showing that agent playing basketball with the now-happy kid or some crap like that. But they didn't! They chose wisely and *left the focus on the kid and the family*.

You simply don't need to keep trying to bash the consumer's head into the message that "*Our agents are great!*" Make it about *them*, not about *you*. Good move, guys, good move.

Finally, but most importantly, CB debuts a new brand tagline, a new brand message: "*Dedicated to the love of people and home since 1906*." Boom! Mic drop! (I'm pretty certain that's a new tagline; I don't recall ever seeing it before.)

If there is a more perfect brand promise for a real estate brokerage, I can't think of it right now. *Love* of people and home. Isn't that what it's supposed to be all about?

David Marine, the SVP of marketing who took over last year, deserves a ton of credit for this spot because it's based on his personal experience.

As Inman reported: *"'When I moved in high school, my parents were building a new construction home, and one of the biggest selling points was there would be a much bigger driveway and the way it was situated, it was a perfect half court. So one of the first things, even before the tiling was done, was [installing] a basketball hoop in the driveway,'" Marine told Inman.*

That authenticity of human experience shines through, even in a TV commercial, with the perfect family.

Plus, bonus points for using an Asian-American family where nobody is doing karate or some shit like that. (#Winning)

I have to confess that I was seriously worried about Coldwell Banker's branding and messaging when I saw the asinine and nonsensical "Coldwell Banker is Blue" commercial. That was beyond idiotic.

But this "Hoops" campaign, the new tagline — the new branding turns it all around. This is legitimately good and right there with the standard setter of real estate advertising: Zillow.

Keep *that* up, Marine and team!

Century 21 rebrands

Nick Bailey, former Zillow executive who took over as CEO of this ancient and august brand last year, wasted no time.

He has rebranded Century 21, promising "Big bold ambitious moves ahead."

Now, that's very nice indeed! Very, very nicely done!

I've got a few nits to pick, but that's all they are: nits.

For example, I do think C21 missed the opportunity to change the name; when you're actually living in the 21st century, "Century 21" is no longer as sexy and futuristic as it was in like 1971. But

I get it! Changing the name itself is probably a step too far.

An oh-so-’80s Nagel print

For another nit to pick, the font and font treatment is a *touch* too much. You know, all the words-getting-cut-off and hyphenation and so on. It’s hip and contemporary as hell, but that means that it will age faster than something a bit more classic. It’s like a Nagel print: it was once the height of cool, but now really screams the ’80s!

But that’s something Century 21 will simply have to fix with more money in a few years when all of the cool contemporary stuff starts to look “Oh, that’s so late 2010s” dated. No big deal.

Especially since the old logo and typography were pretty much screaming “Hi! We’re from the ’70s!” in any event. So this rebrand is much needed, and the execution on it is very cool.

So once again, kudos and congratulations to Nick Bailey, CEO, and Cara Whitley, CMO, of Century 21 for undertaking and then successfully executing on a new look for an old brand.

Now, let’s see you deliver

But the fun part of branding is always the part CB and C21 just finished. It’s the cool TV

commercial telling the story or the art design work to refresh a tired and dated brand graphics, iconography and typography. Now the *real work* begins, and never stops, and the real work is really not that much fun — at all.

Because a brand is not a message. It's not colors, and it's not messaging. *It's a promise*. I know longtime readers remember my talking about this incessantly in the early years, and Bob Bemis did a great treatment of the issue on procuring cause a few years back. But because it's so important, let's go over it one more time.

There are tons of articles, books and blog posts you can read on this topic, but I'll just use this one from Stella that popped up on a Google search because it gets it done:

"A brand exists in the minds of consumers. That's it. Nowhere else.

"No matter how clever your brand messaging is, it can't alter the brand. It can only raise awareness or reinforce existing perceptions. ***If consumers know a brand promise is empty, they'll just scoff at the disconnect between the message and the actual customer experience****.*

"Scary thought, right?

"Not if you're committed to following through on your brand promise, and you move heaven and earth to do it."

Coldwell Banker has just made a (new) brand promise: Love of people and homes.

Century 21 has made a brand promise: Defy mediocrity and deliver extraordinary experiences.

Now they have to live up to those promises.

Between the two, I think CB has an easier task because so many agents do in fact love people and love homes. It's why they got into the business in the first place — because they really love helping other people and because they love houses.

But to deliver on that brand promise, CB actually has to figure out how to measure "love of people and home" and how to enforce that brand and deliver on that promise.

To me, that means ruthlessly firing anybody who behaves in a non-loving way toward people. Not just clients, mind you, but *people*. It probably doesn't mean *that* to Charlie Young and to David Marine, but hey, you guys made the brand promise, so you have to figure something out.

It better not mean you keep an agent around who is a total asshole, treats the staff like shit, takes

advantage of consumers because he can and walks around being misogynistic — because he's a top producer.

It could mean bending over backward to show *love* of people both inside and outside the organization because that's your brand promise, even if those people work for a competitor — or for Zillow! (Heaven forbid!) But yeah, that's what that brand promise means, at least to me.

You can see why Century 21 is going to have a much tougher time delivering on its promise to "defy mediocrity and delivery extraordinary experiences." I don't think I need to dwell on it much, but let's just say that C21 Corporate had best define "mediocrity" right quick and then start handing out guidelines for how to handle mediocrity within its franchisee, agent, vendor and staff ranks.

Again, whispering gently into franchisee ears or sweetly cajoling C21 agents that they really should try moderately hard to maybe one day plan to strive to rise above mediocrity, if their schedule and inclinations allow, pretty please with a cherry on top is not: *"Defy mediocrity!"*

With branding, it's one thing to talk the talk. It's a whole other thing to walk that walk.

Branding pro tip: Be who you are

Which is why I always feel that it's best to have the brand be *natural* to who you actually are, rather than who you want to be. Like my personal brand as "pot-stirrer extraordinaire" isn't all that difficult to live up to because that's kind of natural to me.

My other related brands, such as "That pompous know-it-all prick!" or "That *@&#$ Rob Hahn!" are not accurate, or so I think, but I can see living up to them if need be.

The tagline of 7DS Associates, the company I run with Sunny Lake, is "Fearless Brilliance." I think we can live up to that because that's kind of who we are. It is, if you will, the best version of ourselves. It is who we are at our best.

But imagine if the tagline of 7DS Associates were: "When you need sweet assurance that you're on the right path, call us!" That, my friends, would be more than a little bit difficult for us to deliver. That's somebody we (or some marketer we hired) think the potential client base wants us to be. The disconnect would be pretty strong.

In my judgment, Coldwell Banker selected a brand promise that is natural to them because so many of its people *do* in fact love people and homes. Century 21 selected an aspirational brand that is not (yet) natural to them.

It doesn't mean it can't deliver on that promise; only that it will take more work, more discipline,

more money, more blood, sweat and tears to do so.

So if you admire the work of Coldwell Banker and of Century 21, and you get the itch to redo your branding, before you engage the expensive ad agency or brand expert or marketing consultant, sit down and be honest about who you really are (at your very best) and think about fashioning the brand around that.

Because it isn't the fun easy part of picking colors and fonts and crafting messages that's tough; it's the hard part *afterward* you need to worry about. And it'll be a lot easier to deliver on the brand promise if it is natural to who you are, rather than who you think other people want you to be.

You won't need a whole lot of Photoshop, for starters.

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