

THE 7 COMMON BELIEFS OF GREAT B2B TECHNOLOGY BRANDS

By Steve Smith



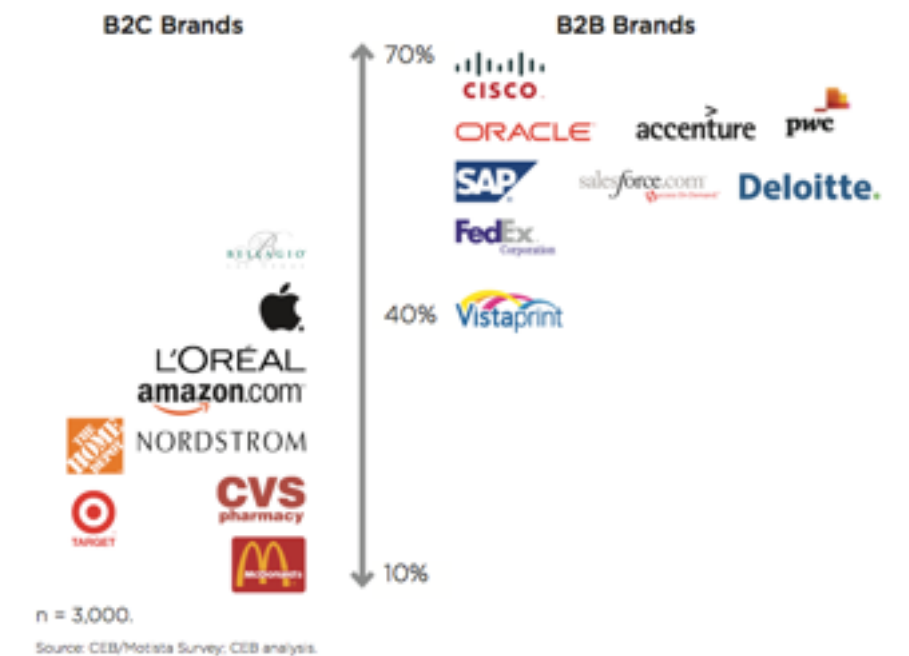
WHAT DO GREAT B2B BRANDS DO RIGHT?

When people talk about brands, technology companies are some of the first they mention. Apple. Google. Facebook. And why wouldn't they be top of mind? You probably use their products every day. But that doesn't mean that consumer-focused technology brands have a stranglehold on brand excellence.

Here's something that might surprise you: A recent research report from the Corporate Executive Board shows that some B2B brands – including Cisco, Oracle, and SAP – are connecting with buyers better than B2C ones – even major brands such as Apple, Amazon.com, and Target.

There's a whole class of great technology companies that most people don't know about simply because they sell to other businesses, not to consumers. B2B technology companies such as Workday, Marketo, and Cornerstone OnDemand may not have as much sex appeal as better-known B2C brands such as Facebook, but you can bet that Mark Zuckerberg wishes his IPO had gone as well as any of those three companies.

So, how do B2B companies that sell "boring" products such as HR software and marketing automation capture mindshare and build market share? Startups and early-stage B2B tech companies can learn a thing or two from some of the great B2B tech brands that have already made it or are well on their way. Want to build a great B2B brand? You'd better turn these beliefs into your mantra.



NO. 1:

THE STAKES OF A GREAT B2B BRAND MUST BE EVERYTHING.

"It's just _____." Fill in the blank with the business technology of your choice. It's easy to minimize the importance of a brand by minimizing the perceived importance of the product. The stakes of any great brand should be to change the world. That's the Steve Jobs Rule of Brand. What was the iPod when it first came out? Just an MP3 player. But the iPod was far more than that, and the idea went on to be the forerunner for the iPhone and the iPad – two ideas that have changed the way the world communicates.



Want to build a big brand?
Start with a big idea.

When he started salesforce.com, Marc Benioff didn't make the stakes just better marketing software. He made it "The End of Software." With a big idea and the stakes sky-high, he created an iconic brand and an entire category called Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) – oh, and fundamentally changed the practice of marketing. Benioff refused to be limited by others' perceptions of what B2B technology should be and **built a transformational brand**. Every now and then, we meet entrepreneurs who aim to build life-changing brands. The companies they build are the ones that blow away their competitors. If you want to build a big brand, you better have a big idea behind it.

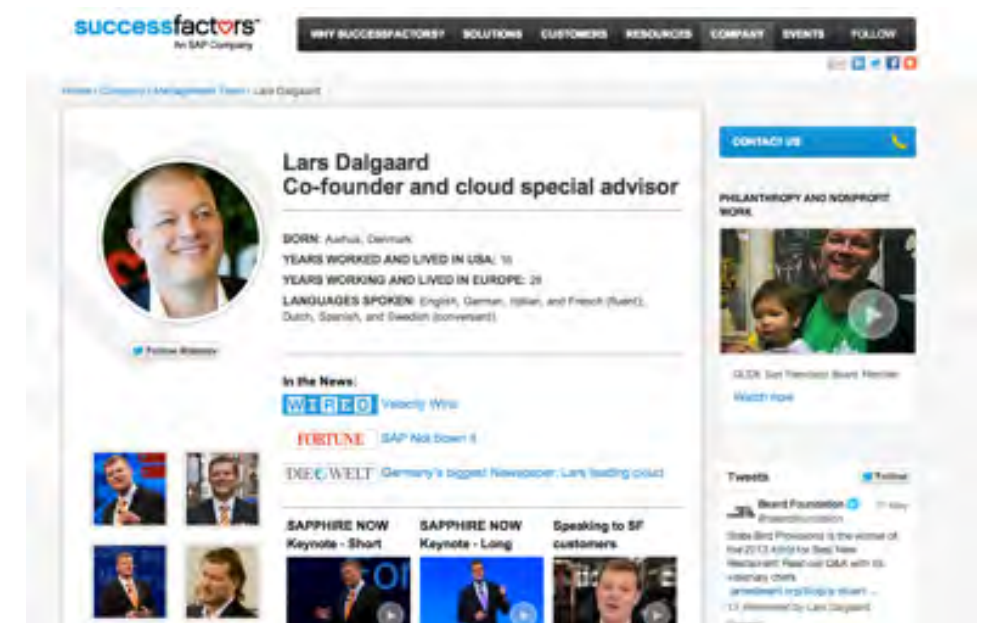


NO. 2:

OBSESSION IS THE FOUNDATION OF GREAT B2B BRANDS.

Great leaders build great brands. These leaders are single-minded in their pursuit of building a great company. The biggest challenge that they face is turning their obsession – their innate drive to succeed – into something scalable. After an organization reaches a certain size, much of the work occurs outside of that leader's direct line of sight. That's why it's essential for leaders of fast-growing tech brands to understand their obsession, instill it into the cultural DNA of a company, and communicate it relentlessly.

While Benioff is certainly one example of instilling an obsession into a great brand, Lars Dalgaard – the founder and former chief executive of SuccessFactors – is another. Dalgaard built SuccessFactors from a small collection of companies he acquired in the aftermath of the dot-com bust into a company that SAP purchased for \$3.4 billion. SuccessFactors defined the category of integrated talent management technology, and the company's success was due in no small part to Dalgaard's drive. His passion was legendary – he even put a heart in his company logo. Above all, he insisted that his people [share that drive or go work somewhere else](#). Obsessive? Yes. It's definitely not for everyone, and that's the point. Hire people who fit your drive and you'll succeed. And maybe they'll even [line up to thank you for it](#) when you leave for your next big thing.



It takes obsession to leave behind a legacy like a multibillion-dollar company.



NO. 3: GREAT B2B BRANDS ARE POLARIZING.

SuccessFactors isn't the only great company or great brand in talent management technology. It's an active category with mergers and acquisitions going on all the time. And when companies merge, sometimes one brand digests the other and other times a new brand is born. Rebranding an established company is a tricky thing. If you play it too conservative, you'll go unnoticed. It's a great opportunity to show the world that something worth noticing is going on. Be bold and polarizing so you attract your target audience. Only lame brands try to be all things to all people.



Check out that color palette: purple, yellow, orange – and is that pink?

Lumesse, a U.K.-based talent management technology firm that supports large multinational enterprises, got its rebrand right. The company formerly known as StepStone Solutions was spun off from Europe's largest job board, and the rights to the name didn't carry over with the sale. As an established player in its category, it had a lot to lose but decided it needed to build a brand that would play well globally, not just in North America. It chose a synthetic name that could grow as the company added new capabilities and was easy to pronounce in any language. It went with a color palette that few American tech companies would dare to choose. Finally, it built [a people-focused, inspirational brand](#) that was very differentiated, and the company's courage paid off. Revenue is growing, the company's getting more analyst buzz, and more prospects are putting it on their RFP lists.



NO. 4:

GREAT B2B BRANDS MAKE AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.



Blue and buttoned-down – Workday earns raves with a very understated brand.

B2B brands that miss the mark on brand usually make the same mistake: They make it all about the technology. They believe that building a better mousetrap is enough, but it's not. Technology is always a temporary advantage. Great brands know that they need to create an emotional connection with their buyers and their prospects.

Workday is a cloud-based human capital management and financial management software company. Its technology is industry-leading – the kind of stuff that keeps competitors awake at night. The company also has [an incredible pedigree](#) – Workday founders Dave Duffield and Aneel Bhusri also founded PeopleSoft, which is still one of the best-known brands in HR technology. Workday is [growing at a blistering pace](#) and its IPO is considered one of the most successful since 2008. While all of that is noteworthy, what I find remarkable about Workday's brand is how it delights people. This is an elegant, simple brand that actually makes people smile – we've seen it from employees, partners, prospects, and even competitors. It balances the crackle of innovation that you'd find in a startup with the trust and respect of a heritage brand. If managed right, Workday has established an emotional connection that will last far longer than any technology advantage.



NO. 5:

GREAT B2B BRANDS ARE ALSO GREAT STORYTELLERS.

One area where B2B brands have established a significant advantage over their B2C counterparts is in [content marketing](#). Every company on this list produces white papers, research reports, e-books, blogs, webinars, and other assets to do more than communicate product features and sales pitches. They've taken to heart [David Meerman Scott's advice](#): "You need to recognize no one cares about you, your company, or your product. We marketers tend to come at things from an egotistical perspective, but customers don't really care. They care about themselves and solving their own problems."

Even among the content marketing overachievers on this list, HubSpot stands out. It's sort of expected to get it when it comes to content marketing. After all, it's a big part of what inbound marketing software is supposed to do. But it doesn't just get it, it kills it. It cranks out tons of [high-quality, high-value content](#) in about every form you can imagine with the aim of helping marketers (myself included) do their jobs better. Want to tell a great story about your brand? Be a real person who talks to other real people. Give away the knowledge you have. Make the goal helping people, not selling stuff. And as a result, you'll find that — [just like HubSpot](#) — you'll sell a lot of stuff.



Wow, HubSpot, I feel myself getting better at my job just looking at all this cool stuff.



NO. 6:

GREAT B2B BRANDS UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF CONSISTENCY.

*When you're king of the hill in technology, everyone's trying to take you down. As it ramps up with cloud computing, Oracle's already in a street fight with SAP, and now Google, Microsoft, and others are ready to mix it up as well. **As one of the world's leading B2B brands**, Oracle understands that part of being a leader is never letting anyone forget it. And even though it frequently gets a bad rap, **B2B brand awareness matters**.*



Hey, what happened to Eloqu...
Wait a minute, those red
airplanes are really cool!

Oracle maintains a single consistent corporate brand to reinforce its leadership. When Oracle makes an acquisition, it quickly digests the acquired brand. And even if the brand name remains – big acquisitions such as Sun Microsystems, Taleo, and Eloqua – everyone moves into Oracle red almost overnight. There's no brand confusion here, and Oracle will benefit from this focus as it battles other tech titans for cloud market share.



NO. 7:

GREAT B2B BRANDS SPEND TO SUPPORT AWARENESS.

*When you say "brand awareness" to most B2B marketers, what they hear is "no ROI." Given the choice, they'll pick demand generation. The rationale is that you pay X amount to get Y number of leads that turn into Z number of deals. Digital display is a great example. Lots of tech marketers believe that banners deliver no value. But a Quantcast study found **100 times more view conversions than click conversions per campaign**. Rather than clicking and converting immediately, ad viewers waited. The same is true in SEM – it takes 3.5 days, on average, for a conversion after an initial click on a paid search link.*

Many B2B tech marketers believe that they can't afford brand awareness in their budget. Actually, you can't afford not to spend on brand awareness. It's the air cover for your demand generation efforts. Don't think you have to go nuts like Cisco and **drop \$100 million on a brand campaign**. Sure, it's a **highly regarded B2B tech marketer**, but there's a lot of room between \$100 million and zero. Find a comfortable percentage of your marketing for brand awareness, but don't leave it out.



I spent \$100 million on brand awareness and all I got was this commercial?!?!



CONCLUSION

Great B2B companies are built on great brands. Most B2B buyers create their mental short list of companies to evaluate long before they're ever in the market for a solution. As a B2B tech marketer, your job is to get on that list of early favorites. Start with a few tips from some of the great brands listed here. Then create a memorable, authentic brand. Then clearly communicate what you do and why you're different.

ABOUT THE STARR CONSPIRACY

You shouldn't have to pay an agency to get to know your industry. The Starr Conspiracy already knows your market segment, who you are, and where you fit in. We're a strategic marketing and advertising agency devoted exclusively to enterprise software and services. When you partner with us, it's to build market share, multiply brand awareness, and drive sales leads – not to bone up on the basics. We've been "out there" for more than a decade, so you can hit the ground running. Founded in 1999 and located in Fort Worth, Texas, The Starr Conspiracy has won eight best places to work awards and countless creative awards.

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