Forget the Brand, Focus on the Customer

The Brand." Ugh. Just hearing the term makes me want to puke. "Branding" was the most over-hyped concept forced on econtent companies by the media and VCs in the dot-com era. And that's saying a lot because almost everything in the online world was over-hyped a few years ago. The result was countless econtent executives who got their knickers in a twist about the outward manifestation of their brand including logos, image ads, and even tchotchkes.

So what about now? Yes, the brand is certainly important to all companies. But what's really at stake—in fact, what branding's really about—is a focus on the customer. As each customer builds an emotional response to a company, that emotion becomes the brand image for them. Fortunately, many great companies understand that the provision of quality content does more to build brands online than pretty logos, cool giveaways, and hip partner deals. Yet, for every company that's taking this knowledge to the bank, there are still more focusing on branding for its own sake.

My first experience with brand abuse was in the early 1980s, when fashion design houses like Yves Saint Laurent licensed their logos to any old shoddy manufacturer. Logos were slapped on everything from handbags and scarves to cigarettes and perfume. I even saw a toilet lid with the YSL logo. It seemed the prevailing attitude of these brands was: "if you brand it, they will buy." Inevitably, the brand image tarnished (or, as in the case of the commode seat, worse) due to poor quality and over exposure. It took YSL a decade to crawl back and some design houses of the era never fully recovered.

So what can a company do? The process starts with marketers who work extensively with the market to understand their problems. Too often, companies design and market their products in a vacuum, cobbling something together because they can or because it would be cool. Then they try to brand their way out of a poor product. Without input from the target market, an offering is doomed to mediocrity at best and no amount of branding will help.

Marketers can learn a lot by emulating the publishing industry, which knows that their business is all about getting the readers' attention. Like a publisher, work first to understand the audience and then use that insight to decide how to satisfy your prospects' informational needs through effective online marketing programs. Your online and offline marketing content is meant to drive action, which requires a focus on describing answers to your customer's most urgent problems.