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Even the best mergers and acquisitions can be messy—but mix in opportunistic competitors and things can get downright ugly.

Case in point: The EMC/Dell merger. It's no secret to those who follow the business press that one-time EMC suitor HP has been critical of the union, to say the least. Recently, however, that criticism has become even more pointed and aggressive, as evidenced by the ad pictured here, which has run in prominent newspapers such as The New York Times.

Just sour grapes you say? Perhaps. But "grapes" like those could potentially turn a merger sour, too, unless properly addressed and, in an ideal world, preempted.

This can best be accomplished by paying attention to two often overlooked, but truly indispensable, M&A tools: communications and brand.

Let me use the HP ad itself to illustrate how you can use a good (re)branding process—with special attention to internal and external communications—to help protect and propel your company forward in a merger situation.

1: Proactively frame the merger—or allow your competition to frame it for you

The ad headline blares its implicit, competitive accusation: "Don't let the EMC/Dell merger put your business on [pause]." HP presents no proof that this specific merger is having trouble or causing any operational problems, but it is able to sow fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD, as Investors Daily calls it), which can negatively impact employees and customers alike.

In this scenario, it may be tempting to respond in kind with one's own nay-saying ads. However, you can better keep competitors from hijacking your merger messaging by developing a communications plan very early in the process—pre-deal preferably—so you are ready to begin communicating as early as possible after the transaction. Your plan should also anticipate negative competitive scenarios, so that you're not caught flat-footed and can respond quickly and effectively to any attacks that come.

2: Involve, inform, invest and inspire employees—right from the start

The type of messaging used in the HP ad is potentially as damaging to EMC/Dell employees as it is to their customers. "Soon EMC and Dell will be forced to turn their attention to integrating two separate organizations with different product lines and services. Will this distraction take their focus off of your business?"

Although the language is technically innuendo, it casts a strong shadow of doubt on the ability of the employees of the organization to serve their customers—to do their jobs—during the transition. The impact can undercut employee confidence in themselves and in the future of their new enterprise. That, in turn, can have the self-fulfilling-prophecy-effect of impeding performance and customer service, or even encouraging employee defections.

But a well-designed merger communications plan will reach across the organization, involving and aligning every level, from the CEO to the people answering the phones or delivering your products.

YOU'LL INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF SUCCESS IF YOU:

- **SOLICIT EMPLOYEE INPUT:**

  Mine their knowledge, respect their value, and invest them in the outcome.

- **KEEP THEM INFORMED:**

  Once you start listening well to your team, you can also speak well to their concerns, conveying the benefits of the merger and the future it holds.

- **INSPIRE THEM WITH NEW PURPOSE:**

  Identifying the "why" of the merger can help accelerate the alignment your workforce. With a clear, authentic, motivating purpose and value proposition defined for the newly combined entity, employees can take satisfaction in helping create the brand experience and delivering it to customers. (And the importance of embracing purpose is rising rapidly in B2B, alongside the rise of purpose-demanding-millennials, who are identified in a recent report as the new majority of B2B buyers and influencers.)

- **GET EVERYONE ON THE SAME SONG SHEET:**

  Your number one opportunity for managing customer perceptions about a merger is through your customer-facing employees. You need to consistently, constantly communicate to employees throughout the integration period, making sure that they all have the same message firmly in mind and know how to deliver it. Think of it like a favorite song they've heard over and over and now can't get out of their heads—when they're singing the same tune off the same song sheet, you can be sure of a consistent message getting through internally and externally.

3: Paint a clear, new picture of the future—with actions

Mergers and acquisitions are often misunderstood as just "deals;" however, it's leadership's responsibility to demonstrate that these big changes represent positive transformation.

The key word here is "demonstrate." Just proclaiming change will not work, as employee and customer cynicism is simply too high (a key byproduct of that high merger failure rate, and the inadequate integration plans that underlie it). As I always advise clients, you can prevent that with just three words: Be. Do. Say.

"Be" means you must make the requisite changes to actually "be" what you claim to be. Then, you must make the truth of that self-evident and "Do" the things that show, rather than simply tell, what you're about. Once your "Be" and "Do" are well-established, you can believably "Say" what your story is, and communicate to your heart's content.

But be wary of getting your 'Be. Do. Say." out of order—once you lose credibility with employees and customers it's doubly hard to win it back.

4: Leverage all communication channels

Effective merger communications should never be viewed as "one and done." An email, an employee meeting, a new logo mug, a letter to customers—none are going to suffice on their own. Integrating two different organizations and their respective cultures, product portfolios, and operations, requires an ongoing, integrated communications program using all relevant channels, from email and meetings to social networks, advertising, public relations—all the platforms and media outlets where your employees and customers live.

Hopefully EMC/Dell created a thorough communication plan, long before the deal closed—if so, they'll be much better prepared to weather the storm HP is trying to stir up. Of course, they are not alone in facing this challenge. Having helped dozens of other B2B firms through mergers and acquisitions, I know that any company can be at risk of letting their competition manage their merger—unless it employs disciplined communications planning and implementation to blunt these attacks and prepare the newly merged organization for success.

Suggested further reading:

"Brand-driven approach accelerates post-merger integration" from Middle Market Growth magazine

"Renaming in M&A situations: If, when, how and why (or why not)"from Pitchbook magazine

About the author:

Bob Domenz is the CEO of Avenue, a Chicago-based marketing strategy and activation firm specialzing in driving change and growth for mid-size B2B companies.

He has worked with the leadership of many organizations at the forefront of their industries, including Interface, Clarke, SCA North America, Boeing, Weber Grill, IBM, Harley Davidson, General Electric and Coca-Cola, among others.

Bob is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Executive Management program on Brand and Marketing Strategy, and a member of the TED conference and Kellogg School of Business Innovation Network (KIN).

In addition, he is the Founding Director of The B2B Brand Council.