

Mission Ready

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The All-American Brand A Guest Article by Kristine Kirby Webster

The other night I was sitting and knitting, and working mentally on a presentation I am putting together. Specifically, I was trying to encapsulate in a few points the hallmarks of a great brand. I decided that a great brand is enduring, establishes affinity, and engenders loyalty.

After mulling over these hallmarks, I found myself wondering what I would consider to be the Great American Brand. Would it be Sears, the original catalog powerhouse? All the Ma Bells, the forerunners of telecoms today? Would it be McDonald's and their ubiquitous arches? How about Coke and their national and global reach?

No. The great American brand, in my eyes, is the United States Marine Corps.

Now, I can almost hear many of you saying, "Wait just a minute, Kristine....the Marines don't sell anything! How can it be the Great American Brand?"

I admit it. When most people think of branding, they think of it as a part of a sales plan, one designed to generate profits. But brands needn't be about sales. As the hallmarks of a great brand demonstrate, the bond and the relationship created is the most important goal of a brand. It can't be stated enough: the true promise of a brand is only realized through the customer-brand experience and the resultant relationship.

The Marines are the smallest of the U.S. military services. But if you were to gauge size merely by the number of bumper stickers on cars across America, the Marines would win hands-down as the largest. And the Marines aren't content to simply rest on their historic laurels. They consistently promote their brand through multi-channel marketing efforts (both externally and internally) more precisely and effectively than any other service, and many organizations. Perhaps that is why they have numbers such as the following that would make any for-profit business jump for joy:

- The Marines have consistently met their monthly recruiting goals for more than seven years running (unlike any of the other services).
- For the Fiscal Year 2003 (which started October 1, 2002), there are 6,100 openings for Marines wishing to re-enlist during this year. As of October 11, 2002, more than 5,100 Marines had requested re-enlistment. At that rate, three weeks into their fiscal year they would meet their annual goal. (Talk about excellent retention!)

One of the main functions for success in branding is consistency. The Marines have had some form of the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor logo since their founding in 1775. The Commandant of the Marine Corps always has the license plates "1775" on his vehicle. Almost all Marines begin or end all conversations, correspondence, etc. with "Semper Fi," their motto ("Semper Fidelis," meaning "always faithful"). And, of course, who can forget the Marine Corps bulldog? All of these symbols combine to reinforce the brand and serve as markers of loyalty and a sense of community.

In their book, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, Al and Laura Ries notes that "if the entire company is the marketing department, then the entire company is the branding department." This is absolutely true of the Corps. Each Marine is a walking, talking advertisement, and a persuasive one at that. The Marines understand the importance of their brand—both externally and internally—more than any other service, and more than most companies. To the Marines, their brand is a living, breathing, historically-based but constantly evolving thing.

Every strong brand today recognizes that the brand is not a static thing; it needs to be constantly evolving to meet the needs of their customers, and it needs to be nurtured and promoted in order to endure. The Marines under-

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stand the need to go out and find those Marines of tomorrow. They are sponsors of such events as the X Games, NASCAR, NFL that are attractive to their target audience. They don't just sit around waiting for candidates; they use the proactive nature of their brand and message and mission to go out and attract people who want to be Marines. They promote not only the tangible benefits of the brand—the uniform, the respect, the ability to serve your nation, and a chance to see the world, but also the intangible—the feeling of pride, of belonging to a select group, of aspiring to be someone great. (Another Marine tag line is “The Few, The Proud, The Marines.”) They also use their proactive nature to “keep” the Marines who have served in the past. Have you ever heard the oft-said phrase, “Once A Marine, Always A Marine?” The Marines make great efforts to retain the affinity and relationship between the Corps and the Marine even after a person's active service is over.

To this end, they have a program called “Marine for Life.” The Marine for Life program's mission “is to provide sponsorship for our more than 27,000 Marines each year who honorably leave active service and return to civilian life in order to nurture and sustain the positive, mutually beneficial relationships inherent in our ethos ‘Once A Marine, Always A Marine.’”

The Marines clearly understand the importance of relationships, longevity, and of loyalty. Besides being a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield (pun intended!), they are a force to be reckoned with off it. They have a large contingent of Marines—past and present— as well as their families, whom they can rely on to promote the needs and the vision of the Corps, from the halls of government to the smallest farm communities, from inner cities to Fortune 500 boardrooms. The amazing reach of their message is only superseded by

their consistency of purpose and message.

What can your brand learn from the Marines? That consistency is vital, that loyalty is a valuable asset, and that relationships created in the brand promise and delivered on by the brand fulfillment are lasting. That treated well, you can create and have customers for life.

So, perhaps your brand needs to go to boot camp and learn some brand promotion and loyalty techniques from the Marines. Is your brand up to the challenge?

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