

MEET THE CONFUZECO FAMILY OF BRANDS

Our world-class solutions bring something special to the table

ezLIFT

SLIIS

CircleSphere
360

DevilTail

oleotine

How Brand Architecture Goes Bad

What business is Confuzeco in?

What is CircleSphere 360? Is it a companion product of SLIIS? The premium version of oleotine? Maybe it's part of the DevilTail line of products? Who knows?

The funny thing is, the people who've worked at ConfuzeCo for years probably don't see it that way. They work on these brands every day and literally can't see the problem.

The road to Brand Architecture hell is paved with good intentions

"We've invested a ton of money building up the CircleSphere360 brand. We can't afford to change the packaging – sales have been declining badly for years."

"We can never change the DevilTail brand. The whole the reason our former CEO acquired it is because he had a vision that it could become a brand platform."

"SLIIS has the coolest, most modern brand name and logo in the company. The rest of the company should be following what my team did."

Bad brand architecture is usually the result of unasked questions, unquestioned assumptions, and sloppy thinking. But if left unchecked long enough, bad brand architecture grows like kudzu and chokes the life out of sales.

ConfuzeCo's exhausted sales manager can't sell. First, he has to start every conversation by unpacking everything for the prospect.

Sales Manager: OK, so when we say "Our world-class solutions bring something special to the table" we mean we make place settings for the dining table.

Prospect: Oh, I had no idea. So CircleSphere360 is some kind of centerpiece?

Sales Manager: Actually... it's a dinner plate. DevilTail is what most people would call a fork, and EZLift is what the rest of the industry calls a spoon.

Prospect: So EZlift is an easier-to-lift spoon? I guess it's plastic?

Sales Manager: No, it's a normal spoon. It's just a clever brand name.

Prospect: What's Sliss? That sounds kind of cool.

Sales Manager: It's actually pronounced "slice", and it's just a knife.

Prospect: OK. Do you also make a butter Sliss?

Sales Manager: We do have a butter knife, but we call that Oleotone.

ConfuzeCo is investing resources in supporting multiple brands that aren't really worthy of being called brands. Each has its own logo, its own budgets, its own separate ambitions and fiefdoms within the company,

An easy test to determine whether or not having multiple brands makes sense.

1. Does having multiple brand names improve, or dilute the overall proposition? In ConfuzeCo's case, it hurts the overall proposition. A prospect might easily buy everything ConfuzeCo makes – and in fact there's a good argument here for bundling to make that even easier --- but the messy brand architecture makes that anything but an intuitive proposition.
2. Does it lead to confused conversations? If the only people who instantly understand what your set of brands adds up to are inside the company, that's a very bad sign.

Eliminating the brand names as seen below instantly makes things much clearer. It's also very revealing, in a way that should strike terror into any brand manager's heart.



"Sure, it's really easy to understand now. But we seem totally generic!", the ConfuzeCo brand managers will howl. "We're not differentiated anymore! Give us back our logos to hide under!"

But hiding is exactly the wrong thing to do. This brand architecture exercise demonstrates that Confuzeco's offering was completely generic and badly undifferentiated **already**. Naming something "CenterSphere360" doesn't confer value on a generic dinner plate any more than calling a butter knife an "Oleotine" makes it a superior butter knife. Your prospects are mostly smart business people: nobody worth fooling is fooled by the clutter of brands. And if you end up selling only to fools, it doesn't bode well for the future of your business.

One of the major hazards of bad brand architecture is that it allows marketers to pretend they have real brands with real points of difference when they actually don't.

A powerful benefit of insisting on clear brand architecture is that when you strip it down to the bones, you can instantly see where there's real muscle and where there was simply the illusion of meaning. Clarity forces smarter questions. How can we compete? How can we create meaningful differences in our products? Is the real solution to

bundle all of these products into a package? Should we have different quality and price tiers? What do our customers really want and value?

By cleaning up the mess, ClearCo can invest in building differentiation into a single powerful brand rather than spending to maintain five confusing product brands and its former Confuzeco master brand name.

For example, something like the below is a lot clearer and more likely to build a truly durable and valuable brand.



Why Bad Brand Architecture is everywhere

We chose dinnerware as a deliberately absurd example of bad brand architecture. But it's common in all B2B businesses. In fact it has probably reached its zenith in the technology business.

It happens by acquisition. With every brilliant acquisition of another winning point solution, the proliferation of dumb brand kudzu grows bigger. Often there are practical reasons to maintain old brand names at least for awhile.... but then nobody remembers to transition them to something smarter. Worse, there can often be demands to combine an existing internal solution with a newly acquired capability. The result is typically a third brand that never should have existed in the first place.

It happens by pivoting. Especially in ad tech and mar tech, there is a near-constant need to pivot and redefine the business to keep up with the changes. With every pivot and redefinition the odds of legacy brand kudzu rise.

It happens by ego. Every ambitious executive wants to build his or her sub-brand, especially in a rising company. Products or services that don't really deserve a brand get one, in part because ambitious people are really good at pushing for what they want, and in part because CMOs have to take care to pick their battles. But it's a slippery slope: once Ellen gets a glossy brand name and fancy graphics for her product, Sam and Ted and Jill and everybody else will want that, too.

Five keys to clear brand architecture

There are times, of course, when having multiple brands under a parent makes sense. For example, when targeting multiple market segments with different buying behavior and desired benefits. However, even in these cases, it pays to be sure your brands are making it easier for customers to buy from you vs complicating a sale. Help your exhausted sales managers by helping them serving up a product portfolio that has real meat to it:

1. Choose an organizing principle
2. Categorize and clearly define types of offerings (are they services? Products? Platforms? Ingredients?, etc.)
3. Establish whether or not there is equity in named brands (ask: What does this name really do for me?)
4. Decide what really needs a (unique) brand name, why it must have one, and what the name should be
5. Seek the simplest, clearest solution that requires the least number of branded names

The average human attention span¹ is now a scant 8 seconds. It has never been more important to make your brand's message clear and intuitive.

Is your brand architecture setting the table for success?

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¹ <http://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/>

About the authors

Tom Cunniff is a brand strategist expert in translating complex technologies into clear language that any stakeholder can easily understand. Tom has worked at J. Walter Thompson, founded and sold a successful digital agency with clients including Unilever, and spent 10 years leading global digital marketing as a client-side marketer. He has also served as Chairman of the Digital Committee for the Association of National Advertisers.

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