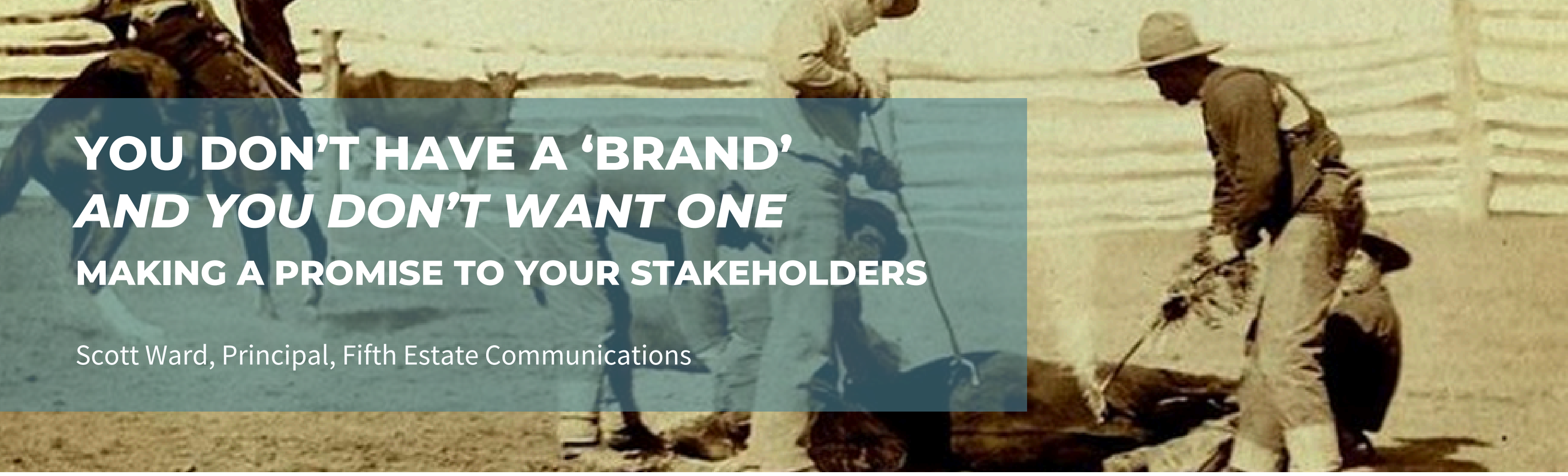

YOU DON’T HAVE A ‘BRAND’ *AND YOU DON’T WANT ONE*

MAKING A PROMISE TO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

Scott Ward, Principal, Fifth Estate Communications

For an organization, product or idea to be effective, all inbound and outbound communications must travel through a filter that has been carefully crafted and is diligently tended to ensure consistent, replicable, easily recognizable, 360-degree delivery of message. In the context of making money, we call that filter a “brand.” However, in recent years the language of brand has been misappropriated and misapplied to something wholly distinct.

A brand, after all, connotes ownership, and aggressive ownership at that. It’s not for nothing that the word still conjures up the image of a bunch of rugged cowboys sitting around a campfire with a hot iron burning an obscure mark onto the hindquarters of a 19th century steer. The fact that we’re more civilized now — the Circle-F-5 on our cattle replaced by the engineered hardwood-like flooring, smooth Scandinavian-inspired lines and soft indie-ish rock of our favorite coffee shop — doesn’t mean it’s any less about clearly establishing ownership.

Instead of a corporate brand, which unilaterally sets the terms of the brandholder’s relationships with customers, what everyone else should be working to build and nurture is something quite different. Let’s call it a “promise”; a mutually derived set of expectations and commitments that serve as a multilateral bond between the promise maker and those to whom the promise is made.

There are of course many similarities between a brand and a promise. Both serve as the lens through which we view an organization. Both act as the entry point for our engagement and the primary touchstone for our relationship. Both define an organization and guide its actions. And both, when properly nurtured, are of extreme value.

But they begin and end in very different places: “Mine” vs. “ours.”

For anyone who thinks there is distinction without difference here, consider the major non-corporate PR snafu of your choice. For instance, after 9/11, the American Red Cross — the venerable and internationally recognized “We Help People” brand — found itself in hot water for spending part of the overwhelming amount of 9/11 contributions it received in places where it thought the money could do the most good. Some of these were things not directly related to 9/11 relief.

Scott Ward
Principal
scott.ward@fifth-estate.com

FIFTH ESTATE
Communications. Integrated.
202-251-9484 | fifth-estate.com

The Red Cross faced public ire not because it was unfaithful to its brand; it did, after all, help people in need. Rather, it failed to keep the implicit promise to donors that in exchange for their contributions, they were becoming engaged partners and emotional investors in a unique and specific recovery effort. People didn't give money to the Red Cross *brand*; they gave money to the *promise* that they could aid 9/11 victims.

We see the difference play out in this political season as well. The irrepressible desire of office-holders, reporters, and pundits to dabble in the intoxicating world of "brand" makes for good sound bites. However, it does nothing to explain campaign strategy or voter behavior. There may be many commonalities between the way we choose elected officials and the way we choose our toothpaste. But brand loyalty is not one of them. Worse, the growing obsession with brand as political analysis, or any core non-corporate communications strategy, threatens to further alienate the American public from the public sector.

That's the real promise here. Getting beyond the language of non-corporate "branding" would give us the opportunity to rethink whether we really want to live in a country of competing logos and taglines, or one of competing ideas — real ideas that speak to real differences of opinion, priorities, and philosophies — that we grapple with honestly, collectively, and in the context of deep-rooted values.