



**One John Hancock. One Declaration of Independence.
What Distinguishes Your Company?**

How many signatures are there on the Declaration of Independence? Frankly, I do not know either. But I do know that, among the signatories, JOHN HANCOCK signed it. You probably can visualize his signature right now. As you may know, he signed his name LARGE! His autograph is the biggest signature on the entire document. Why? The answer may surprise you.

John Hancock's signature was on a mission. Hancock wanted King George to recognize his name immediately, before all others. History tells us that he and the King were well acquainted. Mr. Hancock's aim was to boldly agitate his royal audience and to, without question, identify his emphatic support of the Articles of Independence. In short, Mr. Hancock's purpose was to blaze into the King's mind his defiance of English rule – to stand out among the Declaration's other supporters. Imagine if your marketing and corporate messaging could do the same among your prospects?

I cannot speak as a historian, but if measured by its modern day recognition alone, John Hancock's bold signature succeeded impressively in conveying his message. The War of Independence followed shortly after the King's reading of the articles and the rest is, well, history – no pun intended.

My point is this: While we may not recall the names or other autographs on the Declaration of Independence, the typical American remembers Hancock's, and for important reasons: Reasons that, as marketers, we can learn from today.

Marketing with Passion and Presence

John Hancock's signature was not a passive endorsement. Neither did it blend in with the signatures of other Statesmen. Instead, Hancock's signature spoke with scale and volume. It articulated its presence with emphasis – enough so that, over two centuries later, Hancock's signature is recognized by most fourth graders.

Let's put this in the context of contemporary consumers – consumers like those your company wants to reach. Question: What is America's number one steak sauce? If you are like most American consumers, you probably answered A1, and you are right, it is the number one steak sauce. In answering this question though, did you actually know what A1's market share was? I'm guessing you did not. Certainly, A1 is not the only steak sauce on the shelf. Yet, like Hancock's signature and when it comes to mind-share, A1 occupies 100-percent of the top slot, despite dozens of competitors. As for your assessment of A1, your knowledge of A1's true market share is not empirical or necessary to perceive its rank in the steak sauce hierarchy. Hence, statistics have little to do with your mental positioning of steak sauces.

Much like Hancock's nearly invisible contemporaries, A1's competitors similarly contend for the steak-sauce position in the minds of consumers. Yet, do you know what steak sauce holds the number two position behind A1? Can you name a more-prominent-than-Hancock Statesmen who also signed the Declaration? Personally, I am unfamiliar with Hancock's more-renowned contemporaries but I can tell you that Heinz 57 holds a distant second place to A1. Who would have known.

Penetrating Rejection

Today, unlike Revolutionary times, scale and volume, while important, are seldom enough to influence your audience's perceptions about your company and what you sell. Forced to deal with hundreds, even thousands of marketing messages everyday, consumers mentally defend their minds against your message by tuning you out. Rejection is the average consumer's default state of reception. Your prospects just do not care much about what your company has to say... unless you hit 'em where they live: Empathetically and on familiar ground. In these points, John Hancock's signature is a marketing beacon.

Okay, so Hancock's signature was BIG. Indeed, it was right there, in the king's face. But look again. Look beyond its size. Hancock's signature is deliberate and thoughtfully scripted, as though he knew how the King of England would receive his not-so-subtle message. The signature clearly and with over-the-top style reads – John Hancock! This rebellious autograph is crisp and elegantly written. It has presence and it is emphatic. What about the other signatures? They are not. Without mistake, one can read Hancock's name, but more important, the King – Mr. Hancock's audience – undoubtedly discerned the personalized meaning behind the signature. Again, history tells us, the King had previously seen the Statesman's inscription in correspondence between them, but never so emboldened.

Mr. Hancock's message to the King was clear, not merely because of its large scale, but because of the King's perceived notions of Hancock himself and because of Hancock's familiarity with the King's political motivations. As expressed in the Articles of the Independence, we can be certain that John Hancock's signature conveyed a special meaning – a meaning that might be distilled to an angry gesture had it been delivered by Hancock in person.

Personified Identity

Okay, so John Hancock's signature carried meaning as well, especially for the King of England. What does that have to do with marketing your company two hundred years later?

Plenty.

Hancock's signature gave him an identity – something the King of England recognized immediately as treasonous. Even so, there was no mistake. Hancock's well-crafted position among other Statesmen branded him a revolutionary. Surely, we each would enjoy similar recognition of our companies today?

What about your company's signature – its identity? Is it remembered among the other corporate signatures vying for your prospects and customers, or does it just blend in? Does your audience know what your company stands for when it sees your web site or steps into your trade show booth? From your audience's viewpoint, have you distinguished yourself from among your competitors?

John Hancock did and for it, the King branded him a traitor. Great! That was Hancock's point. The operative marketing discipline here is branded. From the King's perspective, there was no question about who Hancock was and what he stood for. What about your company? Can your audience say the same about you? If they cannot, it may be time to help them better understand your uniqueness.

Take a moment to consider those companies that you admire. Why do they have successful identities? You can be sure, they did not randomly acquire them by leaving things to chance. Neither did they build their identities by blending in or by merely describing the stuff that they sell. Like John Hancock, they went out of their way to grandly present their case with compassion and on

grounds already familiar to their audience. They spoke to the heart of their listeners.

Amazon did it with online shopping. WalMart did it with offline shopping. When you would like a pizza delivered to your door in 30-minutes or less, you probably think of Dominos. If you want the latest news and sports at 2:30 am, you will probably turn to CNN for all the news you need, all the time.

Here is the take-away: If there is no clearly perceived relationship between your offering and your audience; and if there is no perceived difference between your company and your competitors, your marketing efforts have failed. You are no more visible to your prospects than the unknown signatories hidden on the Declaration of Independence. And should it be that, a lack of identity among a sea of competitors best describes your company; perhaps it is time for your own revolution. Here is a short-list of ideas.

FIRST: Know your audience intimately. Figure out where their buttons are and push them. Do not be afraid of being branded by anyone as a narrow-audience solution. Think smaller than you may be thinking today. It is far more productive to be a Rottweiler in charge of a small yard rather than a Chihuahua patrolling an estate. Your company's perceived importance often is proportional to how completely or how thinly you spread yourself across your market. Influential marketers pear things down and work the niches, even at the expense of losing some of their potential audience. They speak to one King at a time.

SECOND: Get out of the sameness sandbox. If your competitors are marketing in a comparable way, stay away from messaging that appears similar. If your competitors are writing small, write BIG.

NEXT: Consolidate your marketing around your audi-

ence's perception of potential rather than around your product or service. Be passionate! But not just about your offering. Be zealous about lifting your customer's burden and carrying it for them in ways they once only hoped for. If you do not know what that burden is, do not be presumptuous. Ask them! Your factory may not be manufacturing what your customers want you to produce. No marketing expertise can fix this.

FINALLY: Be memorable! Push the limit that restrains your competitors. Rather than competing toe-to-toe with your competitors, elevate your offering to one-of-a-kind status in the minds of your constituents. You can do this by relating the usefulness of your offering to something beyond its immediate application and expanding your message to include expectations once only dreamed of. Declare to your prospects, what they could have rather than the more predictable what they already expect.

Be crisp. Be brief. Be bold. Then sign your offering, John Hancock.

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