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Oh, Deer! Branding that really worked

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Were you as surprised as I was to learn that the U. S. Forest Service withdrew its plan for a 5-year, \$10 million public relations campaign? As it turned out, agency employees said the money would be better spent on recreation and forest management, hiring employees, and lifting a wage freeze.

The story reminded me how branding works and how successful the Forest Service's campaign has been. Since 1944, Smokey Bear imprinted the message in our brains, using cute cartoon animals to reach even the youngest audience: "Only you can prevent forest fires" (now 'wildfires'). A survey says 95% of adults recognize the mascot/message. Since 1971, Woodsy Owl has squawked "Give a hoot â€” Don't pollute!" The agency has done a masterful job. As far back as we can remember, we know not to start a fire or pollute. And all those kids grew up and took the message to heart. Kellogg's, Geico and others also use memorable images to start the brand-building the first time you watch TV.

"Branding," a key goal of marketing, isn't just about standing out from the competition. It's about getting your target customers to see you as the only one that provides a solution, whether it's a service or product. The consistent branding message must be repeated at every point of public contact.

Here's personal proof that wildlife has gone resurgent, literally going wild, in my own lifetime: 20 years ago, the only thing that strolled through my yard was a stray cat or neighbor's dog. Now it's like a zoo parade: turkeys, deer, hedgehogs, coyotes, giant hawks swooping down for a mouse of squirrel

Two years ago, the Boston Globe reported there's a "wilderness comeback across New England." 80% of our region is covered by thick woods. In the mid-1800s, logging, farming and construction had whittled the woods to just 40% of the land. Our state says that instead of the ideal 3-4 deer per square mile in the Blue Hills Reservation, there are 85 per square mile! They're considering a hunting season (bow and arrow only!)

More proof that people have gotten the branding message: By the end of the 19th century, beaver and moose were almost hunted out of existence. Now they're back big. There were just a few hundred deer in Mass. in 1900. Now there are 85,000! A decade ago there were no bald eagles in Vermont. Now there are a few dozen. Gray seals off Cape Cod have grown from a few in the early 1990s to 15,000 today. (Who counts them?) It's great to witness this long-term, consistent branding campaign having such a big effect. But there are downsides: In 2011-2012 there were 1.2 million vehicle accidents in the U.S. involving deer!

Visionary business owners know the value of marketing and branding to make their products or services stand out, or to affect public opinion. But it's a jungle out there. An experienced, proven pro can create wildly successful marketing ideas.

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