â€ The AT&T Brand: Any Real Value?â€ Telecommunications Online, November 1, 200

A. Michael Noll
Columns · 2005
Original: http://telecommagazine.com/search/article.asp?HH_ID=AR_1308
Archived copy, Internet Archive snapshot 2008-01-08

NewsGlobe: Commentary

The AT&T Brand: Any Real Value?

by Dr. A. Michael Noll

Tues. November 1, 2005

SBC has decided to adopt the AT&T brand after its takeover of AT&T occurs later this year. There are many good reasons why SBC should avoid the AT&T brand and either retain its own identity or create a new one.

(1) Very few people even know what AT&T stands for. Anyone under the age of 25 has no memory of the old Bell System or of AT&T. My undergraduate students do not even know that AT&T stands for the American Telephone & Telegraph Company. When management is old, decisions can be too affected by old thinking and images from the past.

(2) Even AT&T itself did not seem to value its own brand. AT&T allowed other companies over which it had no control to advertise and adopt the AT&T brand, one prime example being AT&T Wireless. After being divested from AT&T, AT&T Wireless had no connection with AT&T but nevertheless retained the AT&T brand and logo. The AT&T brand is still used on credit cards with no affiliation with AT&T.

(3) AT&T committed a long series of strategic blunders over the past two decades. Its image is therefore quite tarnished and has come to symbolize archaic and flawed thinking.

(4) About the only success at AT&T has been the network that it operates. Furthermore, AT&T announced last year ago that it was abandoning consumer phone service. This means that AT&T has become synonymous with the provision of primarily long-distance service to enterprise customers. This is a very narrow image to accept when SBC adopts the AT&T brand and will be costly to change.

(5) Large businesses — the so-called enterprise market — could care less about the brand name of the service or product they purchase. What does matter is price and reliability.

I can personally recall decades ago when AT&T became convinced that its brand should be used for telephone instruments. However, the Western Electric brand was much more known and had an image of reliability and quality. Many people actually confused AT&T with IT&T.

It is far too easy for top management to convince themselves of false wisdom based on wishful thinking. Is the confused and fuzzy thinking that afflicted AT&T now starting to infect SBC?

Noll is a professor and former dean at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. His past experience included work at Bell Labs, AT&T, and the White House.

Archival reading copy rendered from the Internet Archive snapshot of the page above, for the A. Michael Noll collection at bre.art, with the author's permission. Text is the author's; this layout is not the original publication's.