

If Only I Had Known

by Phyllis Lowe, Former Director of Corporate Communications for Mirant



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The date is January 17, 2001. Champagne corks pop. Spirits are high.

Applause and cheers ring out as employees celebrate the successful launch of a new brand – Mirant. We’ve rolled out a new name and brand promise for Southern Company’s independent power producer, formerly known as Southern Energy. It’s a stellar moment for the new company.

The team has been working for six months with our branding agency – months of research; interviews with executives, customers, and employees; strategy discussions; and presentations to senior management. And eventually, that strategy came to life with the name, logo design, color palette, typography, and preparations for a worldwide launch. Mirant – in 2001 – is an international company with ambitious dreams of being a worldwide energy producer. The company is proud of its presence in North America, Europe, and Asia – with some 10,000 employees as far flung as the Philippines, Australia, China, Germany, as well as large and small cities within the United States.

The new brand is rolled out with much fanfare to those 10,000 employees. The name resonates with the employees. Welcome kits are on every employee’s desk on launch day. A lively launch video – featuring employees from around the world – plays at each launch celebration. Over the next month, executives will travel to each location to present the brand strategy to employees.

As director of corporate communications, I’m looking forward to carefully tending the new brand and bringing it to life for our employees, investors, and customers.

And then Monday dawns. Arriving at work, my voice mailbox is already full – messages from Europe. Questions about signage, stationery, the website, corporate brochure, corporate video. And by the way, we’ll need all those materials in four different languages. Human Resources – which is preparing for the eventual full spin-off from Southern Company – needs help in creating the forms and materials related to compensation, benefits, orientation, training, and recruitment. The calls literally never stop. There are so many requests – for information and materials that I had never conceived of.

We had ordered business cards and stationery for senior executives – but had not put in place a system for ordering office stationery for everyone else. There’s a trade show that begins in a week. Displays and collateral with the new name don’t yet exist. When will we have signage for our corporate headquarters building? What about the lobby? What about the parking deck? What about employee badges?

Requests come from all directions – areas that need branding expertise, but fall way beyond the scope of a corporate communications department. I needed a roadmap, a battle plan, an end-to-end solution for operationalizing the Mirant brand. I realized that I was wasting resources by responding to every request without a plan. However, there was no time to slow down. It was a frustrating situation to everyone involved – my staff, our internal clients, and an executive team who wanted the brand to be implemented now.

A brand activation consultant could have solved these issues and presented a cohesive, step-by-step implementation plan. With such a plan in place, I would have been better armed to respond to queries about schedules, budget, and deliverables. And our team would have had much more credibility as we struggled to respond to the numerous requests and to manage expectations.

Eventually, our team worked through most of the issues and the Mirant brand was implemented throughout the company. We had some strong wins – a comprehensive style guide and corporate collateral system, a website that reflected Mirant’s brand character, and the rollout of Human Resources materials that clearly and consistently communicated the brand. But we had some big misses as well. Signage was implemented on an ad hoc basis by the various power plants and offices, resulting in worldwide inconsistencies. The corporate gift program was handled poorly, resulting in a warehouse crowded with a mish-mash of shirts, caps, and other materials with no unifying theme.

We learned a great deal from the process. **And the most important lesson is this: Anything as large as a new brand implementation requires project managers with specific expertise.**

Yes, my team had all the requisite skills sets – writers, designers, event planners, advertising managers, employee communications managers, and marketing communications managers. But not one of us had ever put a new brand in place. A new brand is an invaluable – yet fragile – corporate asset. Having the right team in place to implement the brand throughout the organization is the first step in leveraging that corporate asset for the long run.

BrandActive is an international brand implementation firm. With offices in Los Angeles, Toronto and affiliate offices in London and Amsterdam, BrandActive helps global companies physically implement a new corporate identity throughout their operations.

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