

What's in a brand?

It goes without saying that every business wants to be a customer's first choice and building and managing a brand can play a significant part in making that happen. The concept of a brand extends far beyond just your company logo to your business' core values and to every interaction you have with customers and suppliers. In effect, your brand creates and maintains your reputation and so reflects your customers' experience of your organisation.

Customers and employees often build up emotional attachments to certain brands, resulting in strong loyalties and even a sense of ownership. This can help maintain employee motivation and increase your sales – A strong brand can make a business stand out from the crowd, particularly in competitive markets.

If you want to build and manage a brand, you'll need to focus on what your customers want and how you can guarantee to deliver it. You'll need to be consistent in your service and every other point of contact customers have with you – for example, phone calls, letters, faxes etc.

Tim Rose, account manager at Vertical explains: "Branding serves as the link between your product's promise and the consumer's desire. The goal is to express a set of basic principles that can be understood by everyone who comes in contact with your business – customers, shareholders, employees, etc. The brand is your reason for being."

This guide look at what should be considered when you create a brand, how to budget for it and how to manage it.

Brand Strategy

Although branding strategies differ in tactics from industry to industry, a branding campaign usually develops along these

lines:

1. Identify the message – A company defines a core message by identifying the distinctive value of its products and services – why its customers care about what it has to offer and what makes it different from its competitors.
2. Build the message – When the distinctive value is identified, it must be framed in a succinct message people can understand and relate to. This will reinforce the core value of the products and services.
3. Promote the message – What good is a message if no one hears it? The company must make a strong pledge to aggressively market its product and, over time, to solidify its image (and its associations of quality) in the minds of consumers.
4. 'Be' the message – The message is chosen, marketing and advertising campaigns are busy promoting it – but how well is the entire organisation living it? Is there a direct connection between the brand message and the customer's experience when they walk in the door and purchases your product?

During the brand strategy phase, it is important to remember the 'Four Pillars' of branding strategies. Keeping these benchmarks in mind keeps the process focussed and will ultimately ensure that the new brand gets off to the right start.

1. Differentiation – To create a brand, you have to set yourself apart from everyone else in the market. You can't build a brand by being the same.
2. Relevance – Relevance has to do with appropriateness, meaningfulness and, ultimately, the value of your point of difference. If your product or service isn't relevant, your point of difference won't attract customers or keep them.
3. Esteem – When you succeed at building relevant differentiation, customers respond with high esteem for

your product or service. Brand esteem can maintain high levels even after a brand has lost its point of difference (e.g., luxury and prestige brands).

4. Understanding – This refers to how well customers understand and believe in your point of differentiation. Understanding also represents an important diagnostic indicator of brand health. For example, when customer esteem for a brand falls below understanding, it means that people know you but they don't like you. If they don't like you, they won't buy your product.

Building your brand

Once you've defined your brand values and your customers' needs you can start to build your brand by consistently communicating your brand values. Remember that every possible contact you have with a customer or potential customer needs to reinforce your brand values.

Key areas to consider are:

- your business name
- names you give your products or services
- any slogan you use
- your logo
- the style and quality of your stationery
- product packaging
- your premises
- where and how you advertise
- how you and your employees dress
- how you and your employees behave
- your company website

If all these are consistently in line with your brand values, your brand will be strengthened.

Your logo can be of particular significance to customers. You should create a policy on its usage, ensuring it is used

consistently and its quality is always maintained. This acts as a reassurance when customers are considering buying your products or receive them after purchase. Your logo can act as an initial guarantee of quality in these circumstances. Similarly, ensure that you consider the design and quality of your invoices and receipts, which can often be the last stage in an interaction with a customer. This can affect their willingness to give you repeat custom and even to pay on time.

It is worth creating brand guidelines (a document containing your core company values and benchmarks for how you want to operate and be seen to operate). Communicate this to your employees to ensure you are all working towards the same aims, and review it regularly.

Reviewing your brand

A successful and well executed brand can enjoy a long life, provided it's kept up-to-date and in line with customers' needs and expectations. When reviewing your brand, remember that your customers and employees will have often built up an emotional attachment to it, therefore it is critical that any changes you make are sensitive to their existing relationship with your brand.

Summary

Branding can be perceived as somewhat problematic but in actual fact as long as you stay focused and stick to the plan it does not have to be this way. The most successful brands are those that are planned from the start correctly and then managed and protected. To build a successful brand you should remember these top 10 tips:

1. Focus on what your business achieves for its customers. Your brand is no good to you if it isn't delivering what customers want.

2. Take ownership of your brand. Pay attention to customers' needs, but you should still control what you want your brand to mean to them.
3. Be honest. If you don't believe in your brand, no one else will.
4. Keep your brand simple by focusing on a small number of key brand values.
5. Be consistent. Every aspect of your business should make customers feel the same way about you.
6. Be thorough. Look at all your systems to make sure they help to support your brand.
7. Involve employees. Make sure they understand your brand and believe in it.
8. Communicate your brand. Make sure every advertisement, brochure and letter helps reinforce the same message. If you have a logo, use it everywhere, but make sure the quality is consistent.
9. Meet and exceed what your brand promises. Failing, just once, will damage your brand.
10. Manage your brand. Continually look for opportunities to make improvements. Don't be afraid to make changes to reflect shifts in the way you do business or new trends in your market.