

Effective Marketing Starts with Effective Branding

Seven steps to building your brand

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What if every dollar you spent on marketing and communicating your company's offerings would return more than one dollar each time you engaged in a marketing activity or event? Wouldn't you be much more active in marketing your products or services? Of course.

But most companies' marketing efforts are neither efficient nor effective. That's because they don't have a strategic basis on which to find a foothold. In other words, their advertising and other marketplace communications are not based on a solid brand strategy--a strategy that will illuminate the "one thing" that makes their offerings better or different or more relevant than the competition.

A solid brand will:

- Deliver your message clearly
- Confirm your businesses' credibility
- Connect your business to your target market emotionally
- Motivate the buyer
- And cement user loyalty

To become a more effective marketing organization, you need to first discover your brand, and then determine the ideal way in which customers and prospects perceive your business. Finally, you need to arrive at ways in which your brand can add value to the company, your customers, and your employees.

Follow these seven steps to branding--and business--success.

1. Discover what a brand is--and is not. A brand is not a logo. A brand is not a product. According to marketing expert and author, Al Ries, a brand is "a singular idea or concept that you own inside the mind of the prospect." In other words, it's gut feeling a prospect has about your product, service, or company. A brand is a promise: a promise of specific benefits and value; a promise that is meaningful and relevant to your users; and a promise that is different from your competition. Your brand resides within the minds--and hearts--of customers, clients, and prospects. It is the sum total of their experiences and perceptions.

2. Review your industry's marketplace. Take time to evaluate the space in which you operate. With your marketing department or senior management team (depending on the size of your company) jot down the opportunities you see on the horizon and the threats to your current business model and product or service offerings. Which opportunities and threats do you think are most promising or relevant to the future of your business?

3. Review your place within the industry. Now, with that same team of participants, assess your company with regard to how you currently do business and how you acquire and serve customers. Then review the products and services you currently offer. From this discussion, develop a list of strengths and a list of weaknesses that you think are the most promising or relevant to your future.

Steps two and three will be the basis for a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)—a snapshot of sorts—for you to use as a baseline for step four...

4. Discover your current brand. Determining where you are today--what your current brand looks like--is critical to developing your brand strategy. Your brand essence will serve as your measuring stick in evaluating your marketing strategies and materials. If you have corporate vision and mission statements, this is a good time to review them. Then, focus on your target audience when evaluating each of the following points.

- What does your company specialize in?
- Describe the products and services you currently offer and define the qualities of these products and services.
- Characterize the core values of these products and services. Are they aligned with the core values of your company?
- What types of people do your products and services attract?
- What does your target audience think about your current brand?

5. Define your desired brand. Once you know where you stand today, it's time to figure out where you want to go. What do you want your business to become? Branding starts with goals; all successful brands are aspirational. They aspire to be something. To begin building your brand, you need to have clearly developed objectives for what you want your company to look like in the next year, five years, and ten years.

Powerful brands are grounded in authenticity and relevance. Your business success is directly proportional to how well you acknowledge what your customers really want and how diligently you apply your company's strengths, values, passions, and vision.

6. Place the brand within a new realm. Brand realm is the "space" in which your brand exists. Brand realm, or "architecture" is not corporate structure. It's a system--like a family tree--that helps your prospects and customers navigate easily within your company and make the right choices. Determining your brand realm is a systematic way of organizing the identity of the different products, messages, or elements of an organization so that people both inside and outside of the your company understand how its customers are being served.

Brand realm gives structure to--and communicates the relationships between--your company including its divisions, business units, joint ventures, as well as its products and services, all with the objective of adding value to the brand. How do you want your customers to see you?

7. Finally, deliver the branded experience. You have a choice. How consistently you present your new brand will either strengthen the company or weaken it, depending on how you "live the brand." The brand experience is strengthened when it is instilled into all your products and services--and at every customer touch point--including packaging, logos, your tagline, your corporate culture, in employee training, etc. The brand experience is weakened when it is ignored, or worse, through inconsistent usage, mixed messages, uncaring attitudes, and impatience.

Every employee has the responsibility to be a steward for the new brand. Your customer's notion of your brand is formed from his or her first experience or "imprint" with your company or with your products or services. Every customer interaction is a chance to enrich the brand.

With your new brand strategy in place, you can begin integrating it into all your marketing and communications--everything you do and are--and watch the effectiveness and efficiency of your marketing efforts soar.