



a comprehensive

GUIDE TO BRANDING

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how to create and **develop** an **effective brand** for your business

Introduction

A strong brand can really differentiate your business, helping your company to stand out from competitors and allowing your customers to identify with you in an engaging way. This in turn creates loyalty and retention and a cost-effective base upon which to market your business moving forward.

What is a brand?

When most people think 'brand', they tend to have companies like Coca-Cola and Nike in mind, concentrating on the visual aspect of branding; such as the logo, or advertising. This automatically disenfranchises most small businesses from thinking that they too can (and should) create and develop their own brand.

This is not the case at all. In fact, a strong brand for your SME (small to medium sized enterprise) can be built relatively inexpensively because it is based around perception. Perception created inside the mind of staff, stake-holders and customers based on what they see, hear, feel and experience about your company.

These emotions are based on messages you send out at all levels, including, but not exclusively, your company image or identity. **The logo is not the brand!**

In essence, a brand is much more about the promise you make to your customers and the evidence you have to show you can fulfil that promise.

It therefore makes sense to know exactly who you are trying to attract, and what your core message is, before you even start thinking about brand.

- Is your company based around cost or quality?

- What is the intellectual level of your target audience?
- Where does your business fit in your market?
- Who are your competitors and how do they sound, look, behave?

Do you need a brand?

Even now, if you think you haven't got a brand - you have. Whether you like it or not - and whether you realise it or not - your company has a 'personality'.

Customers and suppliers will already have an opinion about what kind of company you are based on simple things, such as how the phone is answered, how quickly you pay your bills, how your office appears if and when they visit. All of these deeper levels of communication are already there working for you, or indeed, working against you.

Once you realise this fact, you can start to take control of your brand 'presence' to create a more cohesive and positive message. Inevitably, part of this is your visual identity but the process needs to start well before that.

Starting point

More and more, companies realise how powerful their brand can be for them. Think of a Cola and you will probably think of either Coke or Pepsi. What could you do with your brand identity to have that sort of power in your marketplace?

First of all, you have to take a good **honest** look at yourself and find out how to work with what you have - or change what you need to. Branding gurus call this a 'brand review' or 'brand audit'.

Hopefully, your business already has customers and suppliers, so why not ask them how they see you first?

Their perception fits around who you think you are and as they already know your company with an external point of view, they will enable you to see your existing brand from the outside.

It is also important to get employees involved in the branding process early on to ascertain if they see your company the same way as you do. Chances are they won't, so already your company is sending out different messages - how you see your company, and how your employees do.

Involving staff also helps them understand the process of the brand review, and increases the likelihood that they will buy in to any changes that might result from the review.

Some of the questions you will need to ask yourself are:

- 1 What are your company's core competences? What are you good at, what are you bad at?
- 2 How do customers see you (ask them!) and what do they say about you? Reliable, cheap, expensive, customer-focused, trusted, etc.? What words would you like your customers to associate with you now, and in the future?
- 3 Do you see a pattern in your client-base? Are you working for organisations (or selling to customers) that you aspire to? If not, who would you like to be working with?

Mixing it up

When you have answers to your questions, you should be able to see 'who' your company is with more clarity, and see if it differs from who you thought you were.

When you identify these differences and start to formulate a plan, try to remain realistic. It's not worth trying to be like Harrods in a provincial shopping parade! Remember, you need to be appealing to your identified market profile.

Developing your brand values

Now you have researched, reviewed and asked questions, both internally and externally, you can start to think about your 'brand promise' and what your 'brand values' might be.

Ideally you need to decide on no more than three core values and two 'differentiating' values. There is no benefit in a long list of unworkable brand values that no one understands and that have no resonating purpose.

Core values are those that you have to have to operate in your marketplace and they will often be common to that industry - which is no bad thing.

For example, if you are a bank, your core values might be trustworthiness, honesty, and reliability - pretty similar to the values of your industry peers.

Differentiating values, on the other hand, are the ones that make your business stand out. These values are the ones that make a difference to your target audience and allow them to associate with your business, rather than the competition.

There should be a cohesive link between who you really are, who you want to be and how your clients and suppliers see you and, most importantly from the outset, how your employees understand your brand values.

Brand values give permission for certain behaviours from your employees and in turn these behaviours reinforce the brand. Your employees are at the centre of your brand development as they are in a position to successfully implement the brand.

But, if they don't agree with your brand values, or if you can't get them to buy into them, they can very easily damage the ongoing process. This is why

their involvement in the brand review and planning process at an early stage is so important.

Your promise and its associated brand values are the foundations on which the management of the overall brand can be built.

And, this production has some important supporting cast members.

Tone of Voice

Tone of voice is the way that an organisation communicates with its audience - both internal (staff, stake-holders) and external (customers, suppliers). This communication can be spoken or written.

Tone of voice is about the words you use, as well as the style and personality of the language.

Your brand values will help you decide the right tone of voice for your company and big name brands provide us with easily accessible examples:

- Are you chatty and informal, like Innocent Drinks?
- Cheeky and friendly like Virgin?
- Or are you reassuring and calm, like BUPA?

Does your company speak in the third or first person? How clearly will the person receiving your communication understand it?

Tone of voice must be consistent at every 'touch point'. In other words, when your company engages with its audience, by whatever means of communication, it always sounds or reads the same.

Brand identity

Brand identity, sometimes referred to as corporate identity, is the way your company looks. The visual 'identifier' that allows your audience to visually recognise you in the market place.

Just as with tone of voice, once your brand identity has been created, it needs to be consistently

applied wherever it will be seen - through all communication: Business cards, website and company van, through to staff newsletters and communications with stake-holders.

As part of a brand review it is quite possible that you will discover your old logo needs a refresh to reflect your changing brand values. Style, colours and the design elements you use may need to change completely to engage your associated audience.

You may also find that the methods you have been using to communicate are outmoded or not what your customers actually want. Perhaps, they don't read those brochures anymore, or the data sheets you have been sending them for years, but they do want to see regular news on your website.

Some of the largest corporations in the world will [and do] evolve their identity based on changing markets, changing customer needs and revisited brand values.

BT is a good example, having evolved from a national telephone operator to a global competitor in the ever change world of telecommunications. Their corporate identity has evolved to display these changes.

If your market is subject to change, it may be worth building flexibility into whatever corporate identity you have designed for your business.

Managing your brand

Effective brand management is not a short-term fix to business success, rather a long-term strategy that requires commitment.

If implemented effectively, your brand will grow stronger and develop as your company grows. It may also evolve as you become more and more comfortable with your brand as a marketing tool.

Your employees will help drive this progression, as they are the ones that have the most at stake. You may also find that you start to attract a certain type of employee based on your brand values. Think of

Google or Microsoft compared to a bank or retail outlet, for example.

Your brand will also evolve based on your customer interactions and you should utilise feedback as often as possible so you know you are on the right track.

1. Assess your competitors and see what they are doing RIGHT
2. Ask unhappy customers why they are unhappy and resolve the issues
3. Regularly review your products/services and ALL communication to make sure they fit in with your brand values and your client base.

You may find you will lose some clients along the way. If this is the case, do they fit in with your brand values and where your business is going? A customer that doesn't, may harm your brand.

If these customers do fit with your perceived brand values, you need to find out why the 'fit' isn't working the way you planned and how you can improve your brand communications.

But, don't let a client dictate your brand values as this may harm the long-term vision.

'Living' your brand

This is one of the key things to remember, as you don't want to lose something you have spent time building. Constantly remind yourself, and your team, of your brand values.

You need to be consistent throughout price, quality and message with your interactions. McDonalds have this perfected - you can walk into a one of

their restaurants anywhere in the world and know exactly what to expect when you ask for a Big Mac. There is a level of consistency there - on a global level. You can also see that they have had to change their core brand values as general social values change towards health issues.

You do need to be realistic on what you can achieve with your own resources - both financially and with the human resources you have. The old adage about 'Pay peanuts, get monkeys' is all well and good, but some people want monkeys!

Heart and soul

From a business perspective, a brand is the very core of your business - the **heart and soul** of what the company is about. Think about the big brands and the way they deliver. Obviously they have big budgets, but they have also developed their brands over time, so there is no reason why you can't begin to develop your company brand now.

In an increased world of competition, it is essential to find a position and direction for your company moving forward and to establish a way to engage people.

It is amazing how many SMEs do not pay attention to developing a cohesive brand for their business as they grow and this can create problems as a company begins to move away from the initial business owner being seen as the brand.

Create a distinctive brand for your business now and you can develop a company that gets recognised for all the right reasons, and, by all the right people.