

branding matters

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introduction

Let's face facts; it's tough out there. There can be very few industries that aren't oversaturated with companies offering similar products* to your own, so how do you differentiate yourself from the competition?

The importance of the quality of your offering and what you charge for it cannot be underestimated, but whilst your competitors are battling solely in these arenas, you could be winning the race with a better brand.

With competition growing fiercer by the year, the most successful companies are those that take brand issues seriously, realising it's through branding that they can truly set themselves apart from their competitors.

But what is a brand and more to the point, how do you build one with the longevity of Cliff Richard and the magnetism of Elvis? Get it wrong and you risk ending up with a brand of which the opposite is true.

Let's start with what a brand is, or even better, what it is not. A brand is not a logo, it's not an advertising campaign, it's not a packet of Daz on Sainsbury's shelf and brands don't just apply to consumer goods either. They're equally relevant for business-to-business products, charities, political parties, cities, countries even. Think of how America promotes itself to the world and there you have one of the most established brands in the world.

Branding reaches far beyond immediate representations such as logos and advertising.

Branding is about the machinery behind the logo and the advertisement, and how that mechanism shapes consumer perceptions of what a company is and what its line of products represents.

A brand is the personification or story of an organisation and its products. Brands are designed to build relationships and create emotional connections with customers. At their best they can inspire customer loyalty like nothing else, subduing the logical side of our brains from shouting out, "Shop around!" every time we're looking to spend our money.

But branding isn't about brainwashing, far from it. It's about giving consumers what they want and what they need. It's consumers that are in charge of how brands shape themselves, not vice versa. So it makes sense that one of the first stages of building a successful brand is listening to what those consumers think.

There are branding books, the lengths of which give War and Peace a run for its money, so the next few pages are intended as a brief guide to building a great brand, one that will truly benefit your business.

If you would like to discuss how Blueleaf can contribute to your business's brand, please call Adrian Lomas on 01829 260 600.

* Everything in this report is relevant to both product and service driven businesses, but for brevity we have referred solely to products

branding begins at home

The very first step in creating your brand is not to look outwardly to your customers, but inwardly to yourself, your product, your organisation and your employees.

Being totally honest with yourself and answering the following sorts of questions is a great place to start working out what your brand positioning should be.

- Is my product the best on the market?
- What are my product's strengths and weaknesses?
- What is the main objective of my company?
Don't fall into the trap of citing the company mission statement here. Be totally concise about it, if your mission is to beat your nearest competitor, say it

- Does my business have a social conscience?
Does it care about welfare, the environment, fair trade?
- What tone of voice should my brand have? Inclusive, exclusive, serious, fun, edgy, conservative?

The list is endless, but the important message here is that knowing your business and your product and being completely clear about its primary objectives is the first step towards generating a brand that consumers can believe in.

be honest with
yourself about
the strengths
and weaknesses
of your product

differentiate yourself

Branding, like advertising, is not about lying or deceiving the public, it's about finding out what makes your product special and clearly defining it in a way that people can understand and relate to. If you don't know what sets your product apart from the competition, how can you expect your customers to?

Your product needs a differentiator, a USP. There must be something about it that is unusual, or even unique. Sometimes this can be something very obvious, especially if it's a technology-based product that is the lightest, fastest or smallest on the market for example. For other businesses it might be service related. The Virgin brand has made its billions by basing its entire brand on a USP of great service.

Don't worry if your USP doesn't seem clever or sophisticated; concentrate instead on it being accurate. Remember, many brands have found success with a USP as simple and straightforward as being the cheapest there is.

get yourself
a USP, ASAP

do your research

Now that you know your product inside out, you can start asking others what they think about it. But which 'others' do you ask?

The danger here is falling into the temptation of only asking the people who you know will say the things you want to hear. These people include your colleagues or employees, your friends and family and in particular customers who've given you glowing testimonials in the past.

Research of any real value must be totally impartial, a rule of thumb is to spend 5% of your marketing budget on research. It must come from as wide a range of sources as possible and you must be ready and willing to accept criticism. Focus groups can tell you a lot if you have the budget to run them, or try distributing email questionnaires to your customers and more importantly to your prospective customers. Offering a prize is often a good incentive and will increase the amount of returns you receive.

Ask the right questions and research will tell you how big the market is, what people currently think and feel about the products in it and ultimately will guide you towards the right positioning for your brand.

But it's not foolproof. If it were, there would never be brand failures. It can provide an invaluable insight to your market, but all brand building involves some risk and it's important to recognise and accept that. Effective research is one way of minimising that risk as much as possible.

impartial consumer
research will give
you invaluable
insight into
your market

perfect your product

When launching or relaunching a brand, it is essential that you concentrate on product quality.

If your product is as good as the best in terms of quality, price and service, you have the basics required to take part in the race.

If it's the best in the market, great, but don't get complacent. Chances are your competitors will catch up and usually quicker than you think.

If your product isn't up there with the best, the chances of your brand being truly successful are massively reduced. You may win customers initially, but without a great product to fulfil your brand's promises any success will be short-lived.

It may be tempting to think that Apple's success is solely down to a sleek brand and quirky ads, but the truth is if the iPod for example weren't better looking and easier to use than its competitors, we'd all be listening to Sony Walkmans instead.

Refine and perfect your product before you launch or relaunch the brand and it will save a lot of heartache later on.

your product
needs to be as
good as the best
in the market
to succeed

devise a strategy

Generating your business strategy is an essential part of ensuring success and something you should allow for in your branding budget.

All companies have their own specific requirements, their own set of business values, and a unique way of doing things. Therefore, even the best and most comprehensive strategies have to be tailored to meet these needs and requirements.

And once your strategy has been devised, it's important to review it regularly and to be prepared to revise and update it as conditions change. Flexibility is key.

branding is
the face of any
business strategy,
so the two must
go hand in hand

live the brand

The most basic rule of business is that the customer comes first. When you open a box of breakfast cereal, you expect the contents to be fresh, tasty and everything else the adverts and packaging have promised you. With such products, the customer's contact with the brand is pretty much satisfied at that point.

But with service brands becoming so important, there is now an added dimension to branding. If your organisation's employees do not subscribe to your brand, they can quickly undermine and destroy your customer base. They must understand the brand, believe in it and live it. If they don't, they will have little chance of persuading your customers to buy it.

Brands therefore have two roles. They must persuade customers to buy and employees to sell. When a customer deals with a service brand, your employees are the brand.

sell the brand to
your employees,
before you sell it
to your customers

promotion, promotion promotion

So you've been honest with yourself, identified your USP, done your research, perfected your product, devised a solid strategy, sold it to your organisation's people, what's next?

You can have the best brand in the world, but if no one knows about it, it won't succeed. Design, advertising and digital agencies, direct mail specialists, media buyers and PR companies all have their parts to play in helping you launch your brand to the world.

Once you've got your brand's story sorted in your mind, you have to breathe creative life into it. In a visually sophisticated age, it has to be named, designed, have colours, typefaces, a strong visual identity, all the things that will make it stand out from the crowd and stick in consumers' minds.

With competition constantly growing and products becoming increasingly similar, design remains a key way to differentiate your offering.

It used to be true that in order to get a huge impact, you had to have a huge budget. This can still be the case, but a host of new opportunities, especially the Internet, have made for some very cost-effective and powerful solutions. Viral email and web advertising for example, is helping build brands at a fraction of the cost of traditional channels.

the right look
and feel for
your product
is essential to
its success

consistency is crucial


One final thing before your brand is born all shiny and new into the world – consistency.

For any brand to succeed, the consumer's entire experience from eyes meeting across a crowded marketplace to snogging it goodbye, must be consistent and must reinforce and underline trust. Everything must fit together seamlessly and everything must work in perfect harmony. The brand must feel the same wherever you touch it.

However you come into contact with it, there must be a consistency of attitude, style and culture, as well as the more tangible brand components such as logos, colours, typefaces and imagery. This shouldn't

prove a stranglehold on your brand or limit creativity. Being consistent is about ensuring that everything that makes up your brand feels 'right', rather than preventing it from evolving. Google may change their logo on a daily basis for example, but there is always a consistent feel, it always feels right and is instantly recognisable.

If you want people to have total faith in your product, buy it and recommend you to others, you have to be consistent and credible.



consistency builds
trust and trust
builds sales

conclusion

We hope that this has been a useful overview of what makes a successful brand. Brand building is not a quick process, it takes time and a lot of hard work, but when you get it right, it can become your business's greatest asset.

- Strong brands influence the buying decision and shape customer experience
- Branding creates trust and an emotional attachment to your product or company
- Strong brands command premium prices
- Branding helps make purchasing decisions easier. A strong brand will help your customers trust you and create a set of expectations about your products without even knowing the specifics of product features
- Strong brands show that you want to build customer loyalty, not just sell products
- Branding builds name recognition for your company or product
- A brand will help you articulate your company's values and explain why you are competing in your market
- Strong brands add massively to the value of companies, providing greater returns to their shareholders

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