

Branding—The Basics

Every business wants to be a customer's first choice. 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 can build up emotional attachments to certain brands, allowing for strong loyalties and even a sense of ownership. This can help maintain employee motivation and increase your sales but it can also cause problems if you don't consult these stakeholders as your business grows.

Your brand is what you are really selling to your customers, not just a product or service for which there may already be many existing providers. A strong brand can make any business stand out from the crowd, particularly in competitive markets.

This guide shows you how to create a brand, how to budget for it and how to manage it.

First Steps For Creating A Brand

Successful branding is about promoting your strengths. Start by thinking about what you're good at and what you believe in as a business. For example:

- Particular skills—such as excellence in design
- High-quality customer service
- Providing the best value for money in your marketplace
- Innovation—perhaps in a niche market
- You need to be sure that you can always deliver your promises using your strengths, sometimes referred to as “brand values”.

Building Your Brand

If you want to build and maintain a strong 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, emails, etc.

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
- The names of your products or services
- Any slogan you use
- Your logo
- The style and quality of your stationery
- Product pricing and 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. But if all of them aren't in line, your brand - and your business - could be seriously damaged. A brand makes promises to customers and if they aren't fulfilled, your customers will be far less likely to buy again.

For example, Delightful Jewellery's "Elegant" range may be beautifully produced, stylishly packaged and glamorously advertised in glossy magazines. Its brand values could be "classy, special, elegant". But if staff are rude or unprofessional on the phone, customers won't think about Delightful Jewellery's elegance - they'll think about its staff's rudeness. As a result the brand -and possibly the business - will be undermined.

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.

Managing Your Brand

It's a good idea to get one person to take responsibility for your brand strategy - if you can't do it yourself, appoint a qualified employee instead.

All of your employees will play a crucial part in managing your brand because how they act has a powerful impact on

what customers and your own staff think of your business. If your employees believe in what your brand stands for, their actions will provide effective evidence of it when they are dealing with colleagues and customers.

Keep employees involved by setting up a suggestion scheme, or regularly taking the time to discuss your brand and how your business is performing.

Continually reinforce the message that what they do is important and explain why. Make sure they know that breaking the promises to customers that your brand makes - even just once - can damage the brand and your business.

Get regular feedback from satisfied customers to check that your business is consistently delivering on the promises your brand makes. Ask dissatisfied customers or former customers as well - you can gain valuable, and sometimes more honest, information from them about how your brand is perceived. Honest and constructive criticism can help you see where there's room for improvement.

Remember that customers change too. See the page in this guide on reviewing your brand for details of how regular reviews help you ensure that your brand still matches their needs and preferences. Even the most traditional and well-established brands have to work hard to stay relevant to their customers.

Reviewing Your Brand

A successful brand will remain so as long as you and your staff maintain its values in the eyes of your customers.

When reviewing your brand, remember that your customers and employees will have often built up an emotional attachment to it, and even feel a sense of ownership of it.

It is therefore critical that any changes you make are sensitive to their existing relationship with your brand. Use your findings from consultations with your customers, suppliers and employees to assess the wider perception of your brand.

If there are any problems with your customers' experiences, don't be tempted to just change your logo (often mistakenly referred to as a "rebrand") to solve them. This is an expensive process and would not solve the problems, if they are centred on failings in your systems or staff training, for example.

Remember that your brand represents the whole customer experience, not just your signage or stationery, and cannot be changed overnight. You should regularly review your customers' experiences of your business. This will provide an early indication of any elements of your brand that are underperforming. Prompt action to correct this underperforming element can save a lot of money and negate the need to rebrand your whole business.

Growth Opportunities

The reviewing process can often give you an indication of areas into which you can expand your business. However, it is equally important to use the findings from your review to check if your brand can withstand being stretched to other products or services. For example, if you find that customers strongly associate your brand with particular products, it may be wise to introduce new products under a sub-brand, which may include a different logo.

To grow your business, you should encourage innovation and the development of your products and services. This will help you to stay ahead of your competitors and respond to the changing needs of your customers. However, your brand should always underpin your core values and provide customers with a consistent and reliable experience. Your brand may therefore become synonymous with innovation, but in itself may never change.

Budgeting For A Brand

As your brand should encompass most areas of your business, from stationery to how you deliver your product or service to customers, it can be difficult to define a budget for building and maintaining it.

But it's a good idea to set a budget, otherwise it's easy to spend money unnecessarily. A budget will focus the mind and force you to prioritise your spending on your branding effort. Before you spend any money, make sure what you propose to spend will help deliver your promises and promote your brand values.

The key areas you could budget for are:

- Design needs, such as a logo, signage, business stationery or product packaging
- Your premises
- Your advertising
- Time you'll need to spend with employees to make sure they understand your brand
- Any resources you'll have to provide for employees to enable them to carry out what the brand promises, e.g. customer service costs
- Keeping your company website updated
- You don't need to do everything at once. As long as employees understand and deliver what your brand promises, it stands a good chance of success.

You can create stationery, logos, packaging and advertising quite cheaply if the budget is tight. However, it is a good idea to think about your future growth when devising your image as changing it later can prove costly. You may also find that customers and employees will have already built up a relationship with your brand, which can then make it more problematic to change.

Ten Tips On Branding

To build a successful brand you should:

- Focus on what your business achieves for its customers. Your brand is no good to you if it isn't delivering what customers want.
- Take ownership of your brand. Pay attention to customers' needs, but you should still control what you want your brand to mean to them.
- Be honest. If you don't believe in your brand, no one else will.
- Keep your brand simple by focusing on a small number of key brand values.
- Be consistent. Every aspect of your business should make customers feel the same way about you.
- Be thorough. Look at all your systems to make sure they help to support your brand.

- Involve employees. Make sure they understand your brand and believe in it.
- 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.
- Meet and exceed what your brand promises. Failing, just once, will damage your brand.
- Manage your brand. Continually look for opportunities to make improvements. And don't be afraid to make changes to reflect shifts in the way you do business or new trends in your market.

Source: Info Entrepreneurs