BRANDING FOR SMALL BUSINESS

Branding, by its very nature is not optional.
If you do not position yourself in people's minds, they will do it for you. …
A Business cannot control whether it has a brand.
It can only hope to control what the brand stands for in the consumer's minds.

Peter Drucker

What is a brand?

Too often small businesses think that branding is only for big companies – the consumer brands that are familiar to everyone. They think that for a small business, all they need is a logo, or the visual image for the company. While the visual image may play a large part in helping people recognize a company's products or advertisements, it is only a piece of the entire brand whatever the size of your company. The brand is the external expression of your business strategy as conveyed in every action of a company. Many brand experts talk about a brand as the promise, or the implied contract, a company makes to its potential. It becomes a company's "personality" in the marketplace – its reputation for how well it delivers against what it promises.

How a company positions and promotes itself in marketing materials and sales calls sets customers expectations of the company. However, it is the more subjective customer perceptions that actually create a company's brand reputation. How well the company follows up with customer service, product performance, personal interactions and behavior over time determines how successful a company is in building brand equity.

Customers are influenced by the quality of a company's products and its services. Their impressions of the behavior of a company's management and its employees color their perception of a brand as do their interactions with a company through all points of contact – advertising, face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and even word of mouth. The value of your brand depends on the emotional connection built through these interactions.

Why should a small company brand?

The art of marketing is largely the art of brand building.
When something is not a brand, it will probably be viewed as a commodity.
Then price is what counts. When price is the only thing that counts, the only winner is the low-cost producer.

[Kotler, 1999]

Today's customers are dealing with an overwhelming number of choices. In a market of too many choices, what does one buy? People go with what the familiar. The recognizable. The one they know. The one they trust. So, today developing brand awareness and delivering on your brand promise are essential.

This is especially important for small companies that don't have the resources to support major brand awareness campaigns. Small companies need to have a clear strategy in place for what they want their brand to stand for, implement the business processes to support it, and communicate to everyone in their company the importance of good brand management. And it's not just for products. It's especially important for small service companies and entrepreneurs trying to establish a market position.

Small companies by their very nature have a much more personal relationship with their customers than big companies. It is those personal interactions with a small company that determine how it is perceived by customers and ultimately how successful it is in the market. Small companies, particularly start-up companies, that invest time in building relationships with their customers have a better chance of success.

The benefits of branding a small business

These days, a single horrible customer experience can have a far-reaching effect--recent posts in this (internet discussion) forum exemplify how quickly information can be spread--both good and bad about a company/product and one's experience with it

Chaffin, 2004

For small business, it's a numbers game. You need to get the word out to as many people as you can, as fast as you can, and as consistently as you can. By developing a clear brand strategy and making sure that everyone in your company not only understands it but acts according to it, you will present a consistent "face" to your customers. A clear message makes it easy for you to develop a good brand reputation and makes it easy for customers to become your sales people.

A strong brand can contribute to your ability to create new clients and grow revenue. A start-up or young company with a clear brand strategy looks like a bigger, more professional, and more established organization and develops customer trust faster. When your customers know that they can trust you to deliver what you promise, they will spread the message fast. Conversely, if you don't deliver, word will spread even faster.

How to create a brand

To build a brand that's a positive asset, a brand platform should be built on your company values, communicated to all your employees and then implemented consistently in all your business processes, marketing materials, communications, and behavior. The CattLeLogos™ Method uses a five step method to take a brand from Vision to Value. These steps are:

- Vision – the foundation of your brand promise
- Image – the look and feel of all aspects of your brand identity
- Message – a collection of statements supporting your brand promise
- Means – the methods you use to promote your brand in the market, and
- Implementation – putting in place business processes in support of the brand platform.

VISION

"The good news for small businesses is that the brand is already there. It lies in the staff, their expertise and conduct; in the product and its qualities; in the name, the logo, the marketing. It is just a question of finding its essence and letting that guide future decisions."

Colyer, 2004

Step 1 is to define the Brand Vision. This means understanding the company's core brand values and building the business process in support of them. For small companies, it is particularly important to consider whether they are going to focus on building a company brand or a series of product brands. In these cases it is wise to consider the strategic direction of your company. Which is going to have the most longevity – a particular product or the company name?

Some companies build a successful Brand under the company name (e.g. Volvo™) and then build a variety of products that live up to the brand promise (safety). Others may offer a variety of products or services that can be best promoted under the company name (e.g. Merrill Lynch™ Financial Services). Consumer product companies often have a number of product brands that stand on their own (e.g. Proctor & Gamble™).

How do you find that essence? You need to understand both the explicit aspect of the brand – the content of what you intentionally say and do – as well as the implicit – the context or how you deliver the message or service. It is the second aspect that elicits an emotional response from your customers. This is often more important for creating a positive or negative experience than your explicit messages and behavior.

There are several ways to uncover the essence of your brand – talk to your staff. Ask them what kind of image the company projects? More importantly, talk to your customers. What kind of image do you actually project? How do they feel about the products and services you offer? About your people?

Developing the Brand Vision is an exercise that needs to be driven by top management. Frequently brands are built around the values and personality of particular people in small companies – frequently the owner(s) or founder(s). For example, Apple™ Computers, founded by two young upstarts, took a whole new approach to marketing computers to non-technical users. By leveraging the personality traits of the founders – young, independent, forward thinking – the "whiz kids" – they created a computer for "the rest of us." The whole company had an attitude. They not only believed in the product they built, they loved it. So did their customers. The company built a strong brand with a customer base insanely loyal to its products.

But the sales person, the person who answers (or doesn't answer) the phone can also have a significant impact on a small company's brand. The founder may be a wining personality with great ideas, but if the rest of the company doesn't deliver what he's promising, the brand promise will not be believable. While consumers may put up with a less than perfect help desk in a big company, it can be the final straw in dealing with a small company.

If the management of the company doesn't take branding seriously, the brand will drift. They must ensure that everyone in the company understands the company's brand vision. They must establish processes for delivering brand assets consistently across multiple media and develop the tools and templates required to enable all employees to create correctly branded documents. And they must be zealous about "policing" the brand.

You can have the best, most creative ad campaign in the world, but if the customer's interaction with your company doesn't fit what you've advertised, it just rings hollow. The proof is in the pudding, as it were. Branding is something that has to be adopted on every level within an organization. Anyone with any interaction with the customer must understand and be able to "live" the brand.

Campo, 2004

IMAGE

Image is the second step of the CattLeLogos method in creating or updating a Brand platform. Developing a professional image and implementing it consistently establishes an identity that others quickly recognize and remember.

We use image in the broad sense of the word, not just for the visual elements that are part of the brand identity package. How those elements are presented, how you look, how you behave are all part of the company "image."

First let's address the visual elements of ao can help create customer recognition of your company, but it can't explain your business. It doesn't create the personal experience that is the foundation of brand awareness. And to create the kind of awareness that enables a logo to stand on its own, like the Nike Swoosh™, takes a great deal of resources.

Small businesses need an appropriate logo – one thats suit their industry, company, and personality. They shouldn't try to capture every detail of their business vision, values, and strategy in a logo. It's only a piece of the entire ensemble – like a broach or a tie tack. However, it should be professionally created by someone who understands the requirements of the many forms in which it will be used – print media, projection, display and broadcast. Each of these media deals with color in a different way. Some colors can be displayed but not printed and vice versa.

The most important aspect of Brand image is that it is NOT just the logo, although that's where much emphasis is placed. Everything that is used around the logo also contributes to your image. Color schemes. Fonts. Graphics. Flow charts. Web icons. Are all of these consistent with your brand vision? Do they all support both the explicit and implicit aspects?

The look of all marketing brochures, documents and presentations contributes to the overall "brand image." And here's where one of today's biggest problems lies. The proliferation of desktop publishing software has taken brand image from the hands of trained graphic designers and resulted in a lot of "do-it-yourself" brands. Start-up and small companies often lack a consistent brand "look and feel" or create materials with "cookie cutter" templates that don't distinguish them from the crowd. For example, presentations, web sites, and marketing materials look different depending on which employee created them. They often combine a rainbow of colors, multiple fonts, overused clip art, and busy backgrounds that detract from the message, if not make it illegible.

True, desktop publishing has made it easy for "everyone" to create their own presentations, letters, and other documents but it hasn't given "anyone" the training in design principles, printing, and presentation techniques. These are the disciplines that are required to create a brand image that carries a clear consistent look, and feel across all corporate materials.

As an exercise in evaluating your brand image, collect a set of all your published materials – documents, forms, presentations, brochures, ads, labels, etc. – and lay them out on a table. Do they all look like they came from the same company? Or are they each have a different look?

Putting a consistent and professional "face" to your materials can contribute to your bottom line. According to the CEO of a small consulting firm that established good branding practices from the start-up phase,

"Our ability to project our Brand … contributes to our ability to create new clients and grow revenue. In a recent meeting a new client made the comment that he decided to engage us in part because of his impression of the materials we produced through the courting stages of our relationship."

Lawrence, 2002

Whether we like it or not, people make judgments about us based on personal image. Just as they'll make a decision about another person in about 20 seconds based on their image, so too will they judge your brand image. A compelling message can miss the mark if the audience is distracted by the wrong kind of image.

Which brings us to the broader definition of image. Beyond the visual image of your branded materials, your company "persona" is part of your overall brand image. Your executives and employees are ambassadors of your brand. How they interact with customers, how they behave in the business setting and sometimes personally, and even how they look, impact a company's "image."

MESSAGE

"… nothing can kill your sales faster than a poor product representation, poorly delivered message or untrained field person. This is a very serious and constantly over-looked dynamic.

[Harper, 2004]

It's well and good to have a beautiful image, but what does it mean? What does your company stand for? If you only had two minutes to tell someone about your company, what would you say? If you asked ten people in your company to tell you what your brand stands for, would they have similar answers?

Your brand message is the set of words that you use to communicate about your company and its products or services. It's not just your tag line. It's not just the description of your company. All your communications should capture the fundamental elements of your business philosophy, product features, and corporate values.

To develop a really effective brand strategy, you need to develop a clear set of messages that capture your brand promise. More importantly, these must be known by all your employees and consistently conveyed to all your customers and business associates.

The important questions to ask before creating any communication

- What's most important to communicate?

  If you walk through a trade show, count how many booths make it obvious what their products or services are and why you should buy them? Companies are often guilty of creating messages that only they understand. They are so enmeshed in the details of their product and service offerings that they create messages that make sense to the internal people who already know about the product, but not to customers. Or they try to tell a potential customer everything there is to know about a product rather than what they need to know. Technology companies are most guilty of this. You don't need to know how an internal combustion engine works to buy a car.
- What's relevant? What's NOT relevant?

  Are you talking about product features that really resonate with potential customers. In the early days of the computer color printer business, manufacturers hyped resolution and number of colors. They showed photographic images in their brochures and at trade shows. This was long before there was any software available to create those kind of images. Long before the invention of the digital camera. What customers really wanted to know was could they print their document with a color bar chart? How long would it take?
- What's unique?

  Unless you want to be in a commodity market, you need to be able to differentiate your offering from the rest of the market. You need to make your message stand out from the noise. Maybe you really do have a better mouse trap – is that clear from your messages? Maybe you product is similar to competitors but you have outstanding service – does your message convince people that's important? Maybe you have a really novel new product that's never been done before – can you persuade customers that they need to try it?
- What's believable?

  This one is critical. If you put together a great advertising campaign, slogans, images that create a brand promise, you better be able to deliver on it. Consider the examples we used for what's unique. Does your mouse trap really work better? Do you consistently live up to your promise of better service? Is you new product really something that customers will want to buy, repeatedly? There are many examples of companies who have not lived up to their advertising messages. Building customer expectations and then not meeting them is what we call "brand vandalism".

MEANS

Cows, after you've seen them for a while, are boring. They may be perfect cows, attractive cows, cows with great personalities, cows lit by beautiful light, but they're still boring. A Purple Cow, though. Now that would be interesting. (For a while.)

Seth Godin, 2002

The means include all the ways in which you convey your image and communicate your message. Far beyond a logo, they include documents, proposals and faxes; presentations including specific content and style of delivery as well as format; advertising; trade shows; web site implementation; phone interactions; customer support to name few. This is an area where companies spend a great deal of money, often without measurable return.

And to make matters worse, traditional marketing methods are becoming less effective. People are overwhelmed with product choices, bombarded with messages by mail, email, telephone and TV, and have less time to absorb all that information.

The Internet has become ubiquitous. The word "google" has become a part of the vernacular… individuals looking for information on any product and service can quickly and easily find a lot of information that was previously difficult to obtain. A web site has become mandatory for any business. However, just because a company has a web site, doesn't mean that people will find it, or, if they do find it, read it.

In this world of information overload, how do you create a marketing mix that reaches your target market in a way that influences them to buy. It's a question of really understanding your target market. Since small companies are often closer to the customer than the big corporations, they have a unique opportunity to make every sales call a "focus" group. To learn – where their customers live, where they shop, what influences their buying patterns. Then developing a marketing plan that hits those targets and allows you to spend money where you are likely to get the most return.

Make sure that you match you "means" to your customer base. If you are a business drawing customers from a defined geographical area, ads in local papers, flyers, may be the best. If you product or service is specific to a particular industry, work through industry publications and professional organizations. If you are not limited by geography, place ads in media with wider circulation including the Internet.

Make sure that if you can respond to the channel that you choose. For example, if you offer something through your web site and 100,000 people just happen to hit on it and place an order, will you be able to deliver?

The other alternative for small businesses today is "guerilla" marketing to the max – i.e. get as much free or low cost exposure and PR as you can. A small company is often best known through the contacts of the owner(s) or founder(s). Leverage that. Extend that network by making networking a way of life. Join professional organizations, chambers of commerce, any group where you can make contacts and get the word out. Give talks. Establish yourself as a thought leader that people respect. Develop a personality that people recognize and respect.

IMPLEMENTATION

The phenomena of powerful desktop computers and their myriad applications enable individuals to do tasks once done by separate departments. The Internet (or World Wide Web) now enables individuals to easily gain access to information that was previously difficult to obtain, and to quickly communicate with others who were previously difficult to reach. …Creating business processes that

successfully exploit these technologies is critical to building the infrastructure, or Brand Platform, needed to implement a brand that will thrive in the emerging marketplace.

To build a strong brand presence in this new environment, concepts that have previously remained fuzzy and used by a few, must now be carefully formalized, clearly articulated, standardized, widely disseminated, easily understood and used by many. A well-defined, easy to use Brand Platform is now essential to establishing and maintaining a strong Brand Presence in this new fast-paced, information rich marketplace.

Building a strong brand depends on everyone in the organization. It's not just the job of the marketing and advertising departments. It's the result of customer service, product performance, employee behavior.

"Good branding is boring." It's means creating a set of guidelines and following them. Corraling those who don't follow them. Tweaking things gradually. The keys to managing your brand are:

- Take ownership of the brand identity.
- Create processes for managing brand elements.
- Train people in presenting its message.
- Give everyone who touches the brand an easy way to create documents, presentations, proposals, etc., with the correct brand elements -- logo, font, colors, and graphic elements.

This will enable your whole organization to convey a consistent Image and clear Message through all Means of marketing materials and customer interactions. This will enable you to create measurable brand value. Studies show that aligning internal business processes with brand vision leads to increased profitability.

"Living brands are not a stylistic veneer but a pattern of behavior that grows out of character. When the external actions of a company align with its internal culture, the brand resonates with authenticity. If a brand looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, walks like a duck and swims like a duck, then it must be a duck. If it swims like a dog, however, people start to wonder."

Neumeier, .2003

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