



Core Features

Brand It

Here's the process of making what you do, yours alone.

By Karen Di Prima

Getting your message across is important in any relationship, but it is absolutely vital in the business world. Conveying a clear, consistent message, and having it interpreted correctly, is critical to the success of your enterprise, whether you are a one-man shop or operate a firm of 100 employees. As a business, the messages you send about your company and product, and the way your services or goods are regarded by your customers and potential customers, will make or break you. In marketing circles, this complex concept is called "branding."

Your Business Identity

Simply put, branding is the combined message and image of your company projected to the general public. It is more than a clever logo, a quirky tag line or a maddening jingle, although logos and slogans (whether set to music or not) are all important components of a brand. It is the combination of those elements and the feeling evoked when the tune is hummed, the tag line quoted, or the symbol seen, that — for good or ill — defines who you are to the people who will purchase your product.

Names You Know and Trust

Try this exercise to better understand branding. Picture in your mind the following symbols: the Mercedes "star"; BMW's blue and white "dial"; Chevrolet's "bow tie." Think about what quality or characteristic comes to mind immediately. Car manufacturers work hard to carve out a special place in the market — to be known for a positive quality — to appeal to those who wish to purchase luxury, safety, even country of origin ("Buy American") in a vehicle. These brands are successful because the message they wish to convey is interpreted correctly, and a positive quality is associated with their products.

Do You Need Branding?

The short answer is yes — and believe it or not, your business has an established brand already. Whether it is a positive brand or not is a reflection of every business interaction, every service you deliver and every product you make. It's up to you to make sure your brand stands for quality and overall excellence. A well-designed logo and memorable tag line can project the message of superior products and/or services, but it's what you deliver that counts — the public may give you a first try as a result of effective branding, but for them to continually beat a path to your door requires fulfilling the expectations your graphics promise.

Thinking

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Branding Check List

Get started by looking inside and outside your business. It is probably best to retain a professional marketing strategist to uncover the information you will need to develop your brand. This is for several reasons — a consultant can invest the time needed to gather the information, and also, your clients and vendors will be more honest with an impartial third party. Answers can be anonymous — you don't need to know authorship, just concepts at this point. The approach may vary, but in general, the consultant will elicit responses to questions such as:

- Who are we? What goods/services do we provide? To whom do we provide our goods and services?
- Do we have a product or service that stands out, that is our most popular? What product or service are we most "famous" for? What product or service gives us the most business?
- How are we the same as those who provide the same service/product?
- How are we different from those who provide the same service/product?
- What do we do well? Who in the industry does it better? What can we do better?
- What does the market think of us now? How are we perceived? What qualities about us do our clients, our staff, our vendors and suppliers think of when they hear our name?

Although you may be surprised and even not overly pleased with the answers, this information provides you the roadmap you will need to establish (and possibly adjust) your brand. Your consultant will take the information to a trained graphic designer, experienced in developing corporate brands and work with that individual to produce several designs for your consideration and market testing.

An effective brand is clean, simple, different enough to be remembered and fresh enough to stand the test of time. Think about how a particular graphic will look on t-shirts, in print ads, on letterhead, envelopes, and other stationery, business cards, and fax sheets. Is it still sharp and clear when copied in black and white? If copied multiple times, does it remain crisp?

The Customer Is Always Right

Let the market decide your brand — have your consultant "test" the designs among the same group who provided answers to your check list questions. An experienced marketer will be able to analyze reactions and provide you intelligent feedback, as well as offer suggestions based on the visceral reaction of the test market. Remember, although you ultimately have the final say in the development of your logo, let your customers tell you what *they* like — and go with it.

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