

BRANDING: DOES SMALL BUSINESS NEED IT?

Building a brand can be a useful process for small businesses. It can clarify what a business might seek to become in the future, and sets a discipline on how to get there. Below is an interview with a branding strategist, who provides insights on what is a 'brand', and what to consider when building a brand.

Here's the interview..

Q A CEO wanted to change the company logo to give its identity a face lift, but the VP for sales and customer relations disagreed, saying that “now is not the time to change the brand as customers are just beginning to recognise the logo”. Is the VP's argument correct?

A *In the absence of information about the company and its stage of development, the VP's point of equating 'corporate identity' with the company's 'brand' is misplaced. However, the VP has a point about the need for customers to recognise the company's logo.*

It is important to remember that a logo is not a brand. A product is also not a brand. Rather, a brand is the 'gut feeling' or perception of a customer about the company, the product or service. And branding is the strategy of creating a brand.

So, changing the logo is not changing the brand. If the company logo is already synonymous with the company and what it stands for, then absolutely there is a downside to changing the logo. But if the company is changing direction and seeking to create a new perception, then changing the logo would make sense. In fact, delaying the change in logo may bind the company to an old perception that it is actually looking to abandon.

Q When we think of brands, we think of companies such as Apple, BMW and Amazon. These are big global companies. Is creating a brand even relevant for start-ups or small businesses? And how exactly do you create a brand?

A *The question of whether small businesses should start investing in branding depends on who you speak with. It's a debate that is currently taking place between practitioners. One side believes you should focus on marketing when you are still a young business. That is, focus on moving and selling your products. The other side believes that the moment you market your product or service, especially as you begin to be competitive, the seeds of a brand appear.*

When you start think about branding, you need to ask yourself a number of questions. For example, why do you exist? Do you stand for anything? Why should they buy from you, rather than your competitor? What is your value-add? Where do you position your product or service from the rest of the market? What do you promise your customer each time you sell your product or service?

Once you have the answers for these, you must ensure everything you do as a company, from how you run your operations to your messaging to the public, must be consistent with these values and beliefs. You must then communicate these, and hope people/your customers respond to these values and beliefs. When they do, you have created a brand.

Q You've shared with us some key information about what a brand is, and what to consider before creating it. But are there particular techniques or concepts that may be unique or particularly effective? Would you please highlight some useful ways to build a brand.

A There are many ways to build a brand, but I'll focus on five aspects that I believe could make real and significant impact in the long-run. Remember, building a brand doesn't happen overnight.

First things first. What name would you give that product or business? Believe it or not, people don't pay enough attention to this. You know you've reached the peak of branding when your name is used as a verb, such as, Google, Band-Aid, and Scotch Tape. There is a sort of science behind naming, but let's focus on the basics. A couple of basic questions naming professionals ask for in their brief is, what makes the product or company distinctive? What personality or performance are you seeking to capture and convey?

Consideration of the name is also important for other reasons, such as how it might translate to other languages if you are going international, whether it is already trademarked, or in the drug industry what restrictions are placed on it by the US Federal Drug Administration. Suffice to say, you need to put some thinking behind it.

Secondly, have a mantra. I am talking about a three-word sentence. This is important, because with these words you define your purpose. It helps you focus on an idea, and the mantra helps articulate that. A mantra is not a slogan. Nike says "Just do it". That is a slogan. However, Nike's mantra is "Authentic athletic performance". A mantra is also useful, because it provides you with a discipline about how you produce and/or deliver your product. When you consistently do that, you begin to create a brand in your customers' minds.

Thirdly, consider partnering with other organisations that could amp up your brand. For example, if you produce something sustainable, partner up with an environment movement or NGO. Their 'halo effect' should transfer some to you. It can even be more basic than that. If you sell dresses, partner up with a shoe company. This allows for mutual building of each other's brand. At the least you immediately double your reach of potential customers.

Packaging is that 'quiet' influencer. It attracts attention and conveys a message about the company and what is in the package. It must be consistent with your product. I once saw a picture of a box of chocolates on social media. The chocolates looked sufficiently good enough, but they were put in a large hard plastic see-through container, where the chocolate pieces moved loosely. They were not placed in moulded containers, and clean natural looking materials. It looked unprofessional and cheap.

Finally, if you are operating online, you need to look into and invest in SEO or search engine optimisation. In particular, you need to identify keywords or long-tail keywords that connect with your brand. For example, if somebody searches for "indigenously crafted products", your business should come up in the results, if your brand is partly operating in that space. These are highly motivated customers, but it is a long-term strategy. As you climb up the search results ladder, your reputation will rise as well