

## Brand or be Branded

Often times clients will ask us to help them with their “branding.” Because branding can mean many different things to different people, we usually start out by asking them specifically what their challenge is – or how we can help them.

Sometimes people start by saying their logo is their biggest branding concern. It’s important, however, to clarify that your brand is not your logo. Your logo is representative of your brand and must support it, but building the brand of a company is a completely separate task from creating a logo. The concept of branding is much bigger.

Additionally, there is often a perception that branding is the equivalent of marketing. While branding and marketing are related, they should not be confused with one another. By textbook definition, marketing is: activities associated with identifying the wants and needs of a specific group of customers (your target audience), and then determining how to satisfy those customers better than your competitors. So while marketing helps you identify and define your customer’s needs, etc., it really has nothing to do with how your customers perceive your offering. That’s where branding comes in.

Branding is the perception that potential customers have of your organization – at every touch point. Whether they come into your store, speak to a customer service representative, see a television commercial, make a purchase online, or take a bite of your signature sandwich – all of this plays a role in how customers perceive your brand. And a bad experience at one touch point can negate the brand equity you’ve worked so hard to build at other touch points.

Why is a brand so important? A brand is a belief. Whether your customer has had a great experience with your company or product – or a terrible one, it forms a perception in their mind of who you are. And this perception is very difficult to change – you typically only have one opportunity to get it right. It may come at the first interaction a customer has with your brand, or it may come at the 50th. The point is that you never know when the “moment of truth” will come for a customer and how that single, indelible brand experience will shape their perception – for better or for worse.

All this said, you see how difficult it would be to change a company’s brand in the minds of consumers. Simply updating the logo or developing new collateral won’t cut it. Changing the perception of a brand in the mind of your consumers requires you to take a long hard look at your company, your products and services, and honestly evaluate each and every detail at each and every touch point. You then need to spend the time and money to bring anything lacking up to par. Building a strong brand is much easier if it’s done from the very beginning – but with a lot of work and commitment, reshaping a brand can be done.

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### Brand proactively

Some companies believe that they don’t have to worry about branding. They think that if they simply deliver a good product, that’s enough. This may be enough to give you an edge, but usually not for long. Eventually another company will come along and promise the same thing you offer – and more. Whether they truly offer more may or may not be true, but it doesn’t really matter. What matters is what the marketplace perceives to be true.

In order to be effective at branding, you must have a long-term branding strategy in place. This strategy must be comprehensive – and tell all employees what the expectation of them in this strategy is. Again, some companies

mistake having a great product or service as a brand strategy. This can be a differentiator, but should not be mistaken for a strategy. If you're truly going to compete with others in the marketplace, you have to have a great product or service. That's the foundation of any successful company. Once you've laid this foundation, you then need to determine how to involve everyone at your company in effectively branding your company.

So, what is a strong brand strategy? There isn't a single recipe for a brand strategy – everyone's situation is unique. However, the case study below demonstrates how we helped one client create and then communicate their strategy.

### A case study

About a year ago, we re-branded a company we had worked with for years. Their Director of Marketing acknowledged they had some challenges – and weren't taking advantage of the differentiators they had in the marketplace. As part of the re-branding effort, we first lead them through a series of collaborative exercises designed specifically for their needs. The exercises forced us to pick apart their current brand, analyze the marketplace, and be brutally honest about what they do well – and what customers would like to see them do better.

From there, we took what we learned and turned our Creative team loose. They took the strategy work and developed the messaging and the appropriate pieces for this Company to communicate these brand changes to the world in a way that was honest and compelling.

Once this was complete, we planned and executed an internal rollout of the brand. For one week, employees interacted with this new brand through a series of activities sponsored by the Company. These activities helped employees to understand how every touch point (from accounting to sales) can affect what a person thinks about a company and their product/service(s). Our client's marketing department really understood the importance of getting employees invested in the new brand for the effort to be successful – from top to bottom. To help accomplish this, the CEO of the company participated heavily in the rollout activities – helping every employee understand why this new brand was key to the Company's continued success.

The week of activities was a huge success! The activities truly helped employees to see how their interactions could impact potential and current clients' experiences with their brand. They were able to understand how their actions could change a vendor or customer's perception of who their company is – and truly make them ambassadors of the brand. The internal rollout then made way for a public debut with a rollout to their Company's peers in the industry through various mediums and messages.

### A holistic brand

It's crucial for all of your employees to understand that while they may not have "branding" in their title – or even work in the marketing department, each of them plays a vital role in how your company is perceived. Whether they're behind the scenes coding or at the front counter taking orders, each interaction with your company will influence how your brand is perceived.

Most important for employees (and management) to remember is that you will be branded. There's no chance for your company not to be. It's up to you how you would like that brand to be perceived. You can approach it proactively, then determine how to best share the perception – or you can let others form their own opinions – favorable or not. Wouldn't you rather be in control?

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