

## Branding

Branding is not simply a logo or a tagline. Your brand embodies what your organization is. It shows what you do and how you do it. It is the bond between you and your customer. By default, every organization has a brand, since it is how others see you and identify with you. But if branding is not conscious and planned, it becomes a random process. Your default brand, so to speak, can become one of disorganization and lack of professionalism.

Branding can be applied to anything, from table salt to designer clothing to an individual such as Michael Jordan. It's important to remember that a brand is not so much the product as the idea behind the product. L.L. Bean's brand is not gear or clothing, it is quality and outdoor adventure. Most people do not buy L.L. Bean's high-quality gear because they need it, but because they identify with what it stands for. Non-commercially, branding is more obvious, such as the development and marketing of ideas and promises by political parties and non-profits.

A brand carries the reputation of a product or organization. A branded laundry detergent may sell twice as much product as a store-brand detergent although the two are almost exactly the same. This is because people believe that the branded product is better and that because it's more expensive it is of better quality. Advertising spokespersons have also become part of some brands, for example Mr. Whipple of Charmin and Tony the Tiger of Kellogg's™.

Successful branding differentiates your organization or product from all others. Branding is important for buyer decision-making, as it provides a short cut to identifying professional services.

The more distinctive the brand, the less likely a client will accept a substitute.

In a general sense, your brand is your mission, vision, and values. You must not only define these things, you must also practice them so your brand is honest. In a specific communications sense, you need to consider as a group things such as your name, logo, print pieces, and Web site. Proper branding can create trust in your product, service, and organization. Improper branding can do the reverse, creating doubt about your company, products, and services.

An organization may decide to focus on its brand identity for several reasons, and will probably do so for different reasons over time, including:

- Starting a new company
- Introducing a new product
- Changing the name of a company or product
- Updating or refreshing an existing brand
- Developing an integrated brand system
- The merger of companies or organizations

Branding is not a one-time event; it is ongoing and requires a solid understanding of:

- Your mission: What is your purpose?
- Your vision: Where are you headed?
- Your values: What do you stand for?
- Your services: What do you offer?
- Your clients' expectations: What is your relationship to them?

If you have experience leading an organization, you know that these things are forever shifting and changing, so it is little wonder that branding must become a part of your day-to-day culture.

As you can imagine, this requires expertise in many areas: strategy, design, research, and project management. Most organizations turn to outside consultants for help.

Communications firms vary wildly in their branding experience: some excel at design, others in strategy. You need to do some homework when choosing a firm. At the very least, a firm should know its strengths and weaknesses and be up front about them. Don't be afraid to split the work between firms. You might find one firm that does stellar Web sites, but not great logos. This may seem more complicated, but any quality communications firm recognizes that communications is an integrated process, and will have no problem working with others in the field. In fact, many firms will make recommendations, if you ask.

You can take branding as far as you want. That can be pretty involved, but the time and energy can be worth it. Smaller organizations may decide not to commit the resources for a full-fledged branding effort. But with minimal effort, such organizations can get by with a simple brand until they are larger and have the resources to revisit branding in more detail. Larger organizations cannot afford to avoid an involved branding process, which will probably look something like this:

#### Phase 1—Research and Analysis

1. Review your overall mission, vision, and values.
2. Hone your general and specific goals.
3. Collect your stakeholders' needs and perceptions.
4. Complete your communications audit (a diagnosis of your current situation), including a review of your existing branding.

#### Phase 2—Strategy

1. Synthesize information from Phase 1.
2. Clarify your strategy.
3. Develop a positioning platform.
4. Create a naming strategy, if needed.

#### Phase 3—Design

1. Conceptualize the design.
2. Create the brand and its applications.
3. Develop communications guidelines and standards (visual, key themes and messages, editorial).
4. Decide on any branding architecture.
5. Trademark the design.

#### Phase 4—Launch and Manage

Develop a plan and strategy for internal and external launch of your brand. Don't expect the product, your new brand, to sell itself. Even the most ingenious solutions need to be sold.

#### Phase 5—Assessment

How well has the branding worked?

By the end of the process you should have a branding system that is cohesive in look and voice.

So far, this paper has focused on the big picture of branding. Although the details would be too involved to describe here, we will now touch on a few specifics that support a unified nomenclature to be used inside and outside the organization. Granted, branding is expressed through all that you do, but certain pieces tend to be key:

#### Brand Name

A good brand name should:

- Be legally protectable
- Be easy to pronounce
- Be easy to remember
- Be easy to recognize
- Attract attention
- Suggest product benefits (such as Easy-Off oven cleaner) or suggest how the product is used
- Suggest the company or product image
- Distinguish the product's positioning relative to the competition

#### Logo Mark

A logo can take different forms: a shape with a name, a name alone, an illustration and a name, or just a shape. Whatever it is, it should be relevant to what it represents and used in a consistent and clear manner.

### Marketing and Advertising

All these pieces must be unified, but this does not mean using a cookie-cutter approach devoid of creativity. It means that the marketing and advertising repeat the message and it is clear that the message comes from you.

### Your Written and Spoken Voice

To maintain consistency, organizations often develop documents on key themes, messages, and writing guidelines. These tell writers how to describe the organization and give grammatical specifics such as the use of serial commas and how to spell certain words (such as theater or theatre.) This can include setting guidelines for answering the phone and greeting customers, including the desired tone of voice. These things should be consistent throughout the company.

### Case Statements and Annual Reports

All larger organizations create annual reports. Case statements are used more by not-for-profits and schools. Both pieces are intended to be seen by current and potential stockholders. They need to rally support, generate and support buy-in, and be honest even when honesty is difficult.

### A Last Note about Design in General

Good design does not rely on beauty alone. Good design communicates a message. A beautiful design is worthless if it does not get the proper information to the proper people. Looking good means looking appropriate. Who is your audience? What is the best way to approach them? Who are you and how are you best presented? When conceptualizing a design, it is vital to review existing design standards and create an appropriate aesthetic. This ensures that a project's look is compatible with an organization's personality. Good design is about organization. How you are organized sends a strong message. Does your message make sense? Is your information easy to use? People immediately tune out information that is confusing or irrelevant. Lastly, good design is unique. Uniqueness is important, though not as necessary as organization and general aesthetics. By uniqueness, we mean what sets your project apart from others. Sometimes, making sure that a design

falls within existing design standards is enough. Uniqueness adds a degree of fun, but requires strong concept development. Like the definition of what looks good, it needs to be justifiable and not different just for its own sake.

### ReSources

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*Designing Brand Identity: A Complete Guide to Creating, Building, and Maintaining Strong Brands*, by Alina Wheeler, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003

### ReBrand

<http://www.rebrand.com/>

ReBrand is the online source for case studies and programs focused on effective rebrands: the repositioning, revitalizing, or redesign of existing brand assets to meet strategic goals.