

## Branding Your Small Business

*Delivered by John Bidwell to the Amherst Rotary Club in Amherst, Massachusetts, on 26 October 2005*

First, I want to thank you for inviting me to speak. I'm here today to talk about branding, and the seven aspects of branding that every small business needs to remember. This is not only a chance for me to talk about branding, something I feel is crucial to all organizations, but also the fact that I am here is an example of branding itself. More on that later.

I've had my own business, Bidwell ID, for six years. As a small business owner, I have a deep appreciation for other small business owners. For that reason, I am in awe of the business my father started, something I could not have fully appreciated before having my own. For you see, at the age of 41, my age now, dad left his big stable corporate job in Connecticut to move to a tiny town in New Hampshire and become, of all things, a life insurance agent.

Being a life insurance agent is no way to make friends. You are the Pepe LePew of the community, lurking in dimly lit corners with car salesmen and morticians. Conversations show promise until the inevitable question: So, what do you do?

On top of that, he was "from away." Nobody knew him. He and mom had a simple plan: stay in New Hampshire until their money ran out. That took about a year. So they revised their plan: go into debt. On the surface, their plan looks, shall we say, weak, and you might be questioning dad's abilities.

But their plan did work. Dad went on to million-dollar-round-table this and agent-of-the-year that. He did quite well. He was even the president of his Rotary club, and is now its most senior member.

How did he manage not only to survive but also to thrive? I believe that dad had an innate ability to brand himself successfully. So I'm going to use dad to get into the subject of branding.

I didn't choose my dad as a subject as a way to get into his good graces and secure a greater portion of the family inheritance. No, this is much more than that. I chose him because when others talk about branding, they refer to the same big companies, such as Nike, Volkswagen, and Coca-Cola. I want examples that I believe are more relevant to you.

What is branding? Branding is being aware of who you are and what you do, and getting that authentic awareness into the minds of your potential customers or clients. It is your reputation, your character, you're being.

The first time I tried to explain this to a client I was met with a blank stare. Then he cleared his throat. "Okayyy, so if I get you right, branding is who I am and what I do. Well, my company is something doing something, so aren't I...well...done?"

True. We all have a brand, even if we aren't aware of it, just like we all have a reputation. The question is not whether you have a brand, but whether you have a successful brand. A successful brand requires awareness. It means being conscious of how the world sees you.

And a brand that works must be authentic, meaning you believe and practice what you preach. Otherwise it is smoke and mirrors, which is to say your brand will eventually become "not trustworthy," one of the worst brands you can have.

With this definition in mind – branding is being aware of who you are and what you do, and getting that authentic awareness into the minds of your potential customers or clients – let's find out why dad was successful.

## 1 Research

Dad did his homework. He found that there were no full-time agents in the area. He shopped around until he found the insurance company he wanted to represent. He chose the one he felt was the best, so that he could believe what he said. He talked with other individuals who had done the same thing he was planning so he could avoid common pitfalls. He was, and continues to be, big into research.

In fact, one of dad's current business ideas is to start a service that assesses the true needs of an area. Somebody wishing to start a small business would use this service so that his or her new business served the area's specific needs, not just reflected what the individual wanted to do. Or better still, the individual wishing to start a small business would figure out how to tailor his/her desires to the needs of the town.

You hear a lot of "follow your heart" talk, meaning if you just do what you love the rest will follow. Dad insists that is not enough. He says, "Find out what other people want. It's never just about you."

Branding requires that you get into the minds of your potential customers or clients. Doing research forces you outside of yourself and outside of your prejudices. What do they want? You must determine what they are willing to give you, not what you want from them. That means recognizing your strengths and weaknesses. Branding requires that you review what you do and how you offer it.

Research is not a one-time thing. It is not even yearly. It is a state-of-mind. An attitude. You must constantly visit and revisit your image and communications for consistency. This means reading magazines, books, and attending conferences. It also means taking people out for lunch and asking for their frank assessment of your operations. It means keeping your mouth shut, and your eyes and ears open.

It can also mean a communications audit. Bidwell ID was brought in to manage the print communications for World Learning (Brattleboro, VT) a couple of years back. World Learning has a rich history of international study programs, but has struggled with unifying its communications. Though we had to jump in and start unifying as well as possible on the fly, we also hired a consultant, Cheri Cross, to conduct

a communications audit. This audit was a frank assessment of the organization's communications to date, which in turn lead to compiling recommendations that have helped further guide us in our work with them. Without it, our work, though an improvement, would have continued an ad hoc tradition.

Research can be as formal and expensive as you want to make it, and I don't advocate running out and spending a ton of money on consultants, though you will do more research the larger you get. The point is that you step back from your crazy day-to-day activities, and do it. And to be worth anything, the research has to be objective. This is a good reason why you should consider a consultant. An outsider can see your business with fresh eyes. They may not tell you anything new, but they can verify observations.

## 2 Branding rests on a solid idea.

You can't spin gold from air. This may sound basic, until you look around at all the short-lived, ill-conceived ventures. A common misconception is that communication firms can by-pass this point. I can provide a killer logo and branding campaign, but if it is not supporting a good idea, the organization will perish. It will look great, but it will die.

Dad worked in New London, NH, a wealthy retirement community. Because of the wealth, many new businesses think that they can strike it rich taking a luxury approach, selling high-end stuff, such as \$10,000 stoves from Great Britain. They fail. The type of wealth that moves to New London is reserved wealth. They move to New London precisely to get away from ostentatious spending.

Dad knew that he needed to provide something that was perceived as truly meeting a need at a fair price. Yes, there is money, but those potential customers or clients are more concerned with helping their families. Seeing that this group was more concerned with helping their families than with luxury spending paid off.

## 3 Differentiate

Good branding requires differentiation. By defining yourself as different from your competitors, you are more easily remembered. This takes research. The competition is shifting, especially as Internet commerce increases. You probably lose business to businesses you have never heard of.

This is one reason why you must first differentiate yourself from the most overlooked competition: your stereotype.

Dad did not have much geographic competition, but he recognized a different sort of competitor: the life insurance-salesman stereotype. You know, the Pepe LePew I talked about earlier. That stereotype took away a lot of potential business. People didn't want to talk with a pushy salesperson about something dealing with the end of their life. What are the stereotypes of your profession? Doctors don't listen well. Accountants don't speak in laypersons' terms. Designers are flighty.

So dad differentiated himself in opposition to the salesperson stereotype. He avoided the hard sell, and made sure that he believed what he sold/recommended was the right thing. He became involved in the community on different levels, since he truly believed in that responsibility, and he also knew that it would garner trust. He developed the valuable reputation of "not your typical salesman."

The problem with differentiating yourself from your stereotype is that it may not be enough in the long run. You need to differentiate yourself in a unique way, a way that can't be duplicated.

As other agents became more savvy about customer service, dad needed to differentiate himself in additional ways. Fortunately, by this time he had been in town for a while. He had unique claims: he was the only agent offering his company; he was the oldest and most experienced agent in the area.

When we meet with a client, it is important to recognize their unique position and convey that. Unfortunately, most businesses prefer to look like others in their field, so there is no differentiation. I'm not talking about crazy differences for difference's sake. Be sure to differentiate yourself in a unique and authentic way. Like customer service, "quality" does not work as a differentiating factor. Well, customer service and quality can be differentiators, but only if your competition is not smart enough to improve theirs. Best to focus on aspects that you can own: a specific service, a specific product, longevity, leadership, or being the biggest.

We work with the software developer AtalaSoft, whose high-tech offerings are surprisingly easy to use. To reflect this, we put together promotion and packaging that uses white space and simple messages. This clean and classic approach is a world away from their competitors, whose ads are drowning in technical details.

The absolute best differentiator is being first in someone's mind. Dad was the first full-time life insurance agent in New London.

#### 4 Focus

As dad's business became successful, he was tempted to diversify his offerings. He only did so if it logically fit with the life insurance. He stayed away from offering different kinds of insurance. He didn't expand beyond a geographical area, and he turned down several requests that he become a general agent. Thus, when people thought of Paul Bidwell, they thought of life insurance, or more importantly, when they thought of life insurance, dad automatically came to mind.

Don't expand; contract.

Organizations usually expand for one of two reasons. First, they panic. Their competition is offering something they are not offering. The problem with this approach is that you usually find yourself going head-to-head with your competitor in an area in which your competitor is stronger. Don't go head-to-head when you can make a claim that others can't challenge. Don't highlight shoring up your weaknesses. Play up your strengths.

A few years back, Mount Holyoke College went through a branding change. The College needed to shed the persona of a remote girls' school. We were involved with doing the new logo, the viewbook, and the redesign of the alumnae magazine. This was not just making things look flashier. Everything—words, messages, and images—was to showcase the dynamic quality of the school. They did not pretend to be bigger than they are; they took advantage of their size and the fact that they are a women's college. This is a place for women to grow. A place with diverse populations, where women can explore other worlds. We incorporated that overall message in the redesign of the alumnae magazine, giving it a more sophisticated look. The same

was emphasized in the feel of a new viewbook we worked on, and that message was reinforced in the logo we designed, using the H as a gateway to other horizons.

Second, a business expands out of ego. They think that since they have been successful in one area, why not leverage that great reputation in another? The problem is that people prefer focus. Focus says leadership and quality, and focusing also makes it easier for others to remember you. If you needed cosmetic surgery, would you choose somebody who specializes in that, or would you be content with somebody who did it in addition to dermatology?

### 5 Simplicity

Hand-in-hand with focusing is simplicity. You need to say in plain and simple terms why others should go to you. Customers and clients want the simplest way to remember you. This is more important than ever in an age of over communication.

Businesses and organizations tend to tell too much. Just look at most promotions. Does anybody actually read all that stuff? Of course not, but here is the trick. You want to be simple, but you still need to convey important details, the details that help differentiate you. I know this sounds like a paradox, but here's how it works: pick only the important details and convey them in as simple a way as possible. You know, separate the wheat from the chaff.

At present, we are working with the Green Belt Movement, an international non-profit. Many non-profits deal with the environment. Many deal with human rights, but only Green Belt links the two. Green Belt is in a period of great change since their founder Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize last year. They are opening offices around the globe, but they are not forgetting their focus: the environment and the human condition in Wangari's home country of Kenya.

Simplicity is one of the greatest struggles for businesses. Marissa Mayer of Google (Google is a perfect example of the power of focus) says, "Simplicity is giving people what they want when they want it, rather than everything they could ever want, even when they don't."

### 6 Name

The power of a good name is sorely underestimated. Mistakes abound. People choose names that are limiting, such as naming a business after a geographic area that may not apply in a couple of years. They choose names that are confusing and long, often in an attempt to have the name describe exactly what the company does. That rarely works. From there, they try to simplify with initialisms that are not easier to remember than the original name itself.

This past spring we started working with the Greater Lynn Mental Health and Retardation Association, or the GLMHRA. This name was the worst we had encountered. Nobody used the name. The initialism didn't make things any easier. Nobody could remember either. And there was no easy short form. Lynn Health? Lynn Retardation? As an organization, they were not even confined to the Lynn area any longer. To make matters worse, they had growing competition from an organization called Seven Hills. If you are looking for these services, who are you more likely to remember? Our first task was to develop a new name. We wanted something easy to remember, easy to spell, different from the competition, and that captured the essence of what they did. The answer was Bridgewell (which you will note happens to have our name hidden within, though I insist this was not planned).

What did my dad do for a name? He just used his own. Hey, Bidwell isn't too bad, as luck would have it. It's near the start of the alphabet. It is easy to spell. It has a nice connotation.

### 7 Promotion

You want to promote your category or your field, not yourself. You don't stand a chance of getting clients unless people see what you do as important. Dad never went around telling people how great he was, or that people should buy from his company, though he certainly believed that. He talked about security for one's family. He listened to and educated the potential client. Good branding is about being interactive. It's about listening and responding. He believed deeply that financial planning and life insurance were vital and had a huge impact on quality of life. Once people were on board they were more

receptive to the solutions that dad offered. That's what I'm doing now. I truly believe that good branding is one of the keys to a successful enterprise. So I preach it. Bidwell ID teaches it through free articles we offer on our Web site, and that is the purpose of the branding symposium, Brand New 2005, we are holding next week. By doing this I also happen to link my business with branding in your mind.

Promotion can take a long time. It requires persistence. There is no shortcut. Its because people ascribe cachet to longevity. Dad knew this. He was just shocked that the family savings disappeared so quickly, but after that first nail-biting year in New Hampshire, he knew that if he stuck with it he could break through because all the other pieces were in place. And he did.

Promotion also takes continuity. Many organizations put together their promotions in an ad hoc manner. As a result, logos, colors, and fonts are not used consistently. The writing varies. Nothing is coherent. You want to look at all the ways that you communicate to make sure that they are consistent and coherent. Develop some guidelines about how your logo is used. Put together a list of themes that you should repeat often to drive home your brand.

Dad was consistent in how he presented himself. He was always professional, though accessible. He used the same colors and fonts and name. Everything matched.

Wow, you might be saying, that sounds like the death of creativity. Establish limited rules and make sure they are followed. Suddenly, you are The Man, the very thing you vowed never to become. Not so. Consistency does not preclude creativity. Yes, you want to adhere to certain rules, but you also need to be open to non-conventional ideas that still reinforce your brand.

That's my spiel on branding. My guess is that some of you are thinking this is not branding, this is just common sense. I read an article to that effect last month. What's all this hoopla about branding, the author fumed. Why, if you just go out there and exercise good clean common sense you will do well. Except that most businesses fail. If all this is just common sense

it didn't strike me as too common. I told my dad this. He disagreed with me. He said that common sense is common. People have at least an idea of what they should be doing. They just don't do it.

That's why it's important to get the word out. No matter what you do, strong authentic branding really helps people, and you won't do so badly yourself.