



IT CLICKS. BUSINESS AT THE SPEED OF A CLICK.

TRANSFORMING YOUR B2B BRAND



In today's saturated marketplace, companies are lost in a sea of messages. That's why companies that succeed build relationships with customers that transcend their products. And, that's what branding is all about.

To be successful with your brand, you need to recognize that building a solid brand identity is crucial to ongoing customer acquisition and retention. A strong brand will set you apart. It shapes how your customers feel about you, encourages loyalty and ultimately can drive your bottom line.



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Your company should have a solid foundation and a unique place in its market. This position will allow you to successfully translate your business needs into creative branding solutions.

Enhancing your identity provides the perfect opportunity to build a shared understanding of what your company and brand stands for.

It's a point in your company history in which everyone, at every level, begins working in the same direction for the same goal, building brand recognition.

It's a time when your company's promise, or brand, can be fully defined and communicated to every employee, with a clear rationale and guidelines for presenting the brand.

1. WHAT IS BRANDING?

I'm sure that you have some understanding of branding and what it is.

I prefer to keep it simple. A brand is the perception that someone has of your business, its products and services. The brand answers the question – What do you want your customers to envision when they think about your company?

A brand consists of several elements, all of which work together to create an impression in the mind of everyone who comes into contact with your company and its products and services.

An ideal brand does three primary things –

1. It communicates a positive, accurate and credible image of your company in terms of benefits to the target market.
2. It differentiates your company from competing companies.
3. It gives the target market a reason to do business with your company instead of your competitors.

2. BRANDING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Branding has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. Let's talk about this briefly.

Believe it or not the brand began, quite literally, as a method for ranchers to identify their cattle. By burning a distinct symbol into the hide of a calf, the owner could assure that if it one day wandered off the property or was stolen, he'd be able to point to that brand and claim the animal as his rightful property.

When manufacturers of products adopted the brand as a way of guaranteeing the quality of their goods, its function remained pretty much the same for most of the 20th century.

But, branding has really changed from those days of mass marketing and studying target populations in order to manipulate them. The days are gone for conducting polls and market surveys to draw clear, clean lines between demographic groups by four factors: race, age, gender and wages.

**TIP**

Your goal now is to let your target audiences know that you really understand them, but look like you aren't trying too hard. Instead of creating and marketing a brand image, you develop the brand value, and then create marketing campaigns for a target market that is intended to make them feel good about being understood.

Now it's all about psychographics. Brand images have changed from simply reflecting on products. Positioning comes from your target audiences' perceptions. It's thinking about emotions and attitudes. Unlike broad demographics, psychographic research is developed using more narrowly structured qualitative-analysis techniques, like focus groups and in-depth interviews and surveys.

This type of targeting reaches for an individual customer more directly. It's as if a marketing campaign has singled you out and recognizes your core values and aspirations, without having lumped you into a stereotype.

As your target audiences gain more control over the media in which interactive stories unfold, the landscape has shifted and will continue to do so. Your job is to make sure that you keep up with these dramatic changes to ensure you continue to know your customer and how to reach them.

3.**THE BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) BRANDING DIFFERENCE**

Quick – name 10 top consumer brands. You should be able to do this quickly. Now, just as quickly, name 10 top B2B brands.

Not so easy, is it? Unless you live and breathe marketing like us, chances are you'll have a hard time coming up with more than half a dozen strong B2B brands.

I believe that the reason you can't come up with these is that many B2B companies fail to establish a strong brand. Many approach branding in the same manner as a consumer company. As a result, they send out mixed or the wrong messages to their customer base and wind up with muddled, ineffective brands.

Granted, consumer companies spend billions of dollars creating and promoting their brands. In general, consumer companies have simpler product offerings and value propositions. They can easily brand-attach to their customers at the product level.

In contrast, B2B companies tend to have more complex products, services and value propositions. In order to establish distinctive brands, you must separate your brand identity from the product or service and brand-attach your customers at a higher level, a process much easier said than done.

Regardless of the company, a brand represents your commitment to sustain value over time. First, it communicates a compelling, differentiated value proposition. Second, it establishes credibility for that value proposition in the marketplace. Failure to perform either of these, results in a weak or nonexistent brand. Here's where consumer versus B2B branding splits.

To fulfill its promise, every brand must have value proposition that resonates with the market. B2B companies have three value propositions that enable you to sustain a competitive advantage –

1. lowest total cost (operational excellence)
2. best product, period (product performance)
3. best total solution (customer intimacy)

To build a strong B2B brand, you have to determine the specific components of value within your top-line value proposition, keeping in mind that different customers will value different product /service attributes.

For example, lowest-total-cost companies must determine how the customer defines total cost, and which of these dimensions will differentiate their product offering from the competition. In addition to the actual purchase price, lowest total cost can also include delivery, convenience, ease of purchase, product guarantees, ongoing service levels and much more.

Similarly, best-product companies must determine which dimensions of their performance their customers consider most important. Here again, best product can mean many different things to different customers. Effective branding for this category involves figuring out which specific dimensions of performance hold the most value for each customer segment, and emphasizing those dimensions in the brand message.

Best total-solution companies, must answer questions such as: what problem are we solving for the customer? What type of solution do we offer? What is the value of that solution as identified by the customer?

Your first step in branding will be to decide what your value position is. A little later, I'll discuss about how to determine this.



TIP

Building a strong B2B brand doesn't happen overnight. It requires an ongoing process of knowing your customer, making accurate decisions based on that feedback and eternal vigilance to ensure your brand message stays relevant to the market.

4.

WHY SHOULD YOU BRAND NOW?

The Benefit – Well-focused and consistent attention to branding is the most effective way to compete, to rise above the noise and become a key factor in your industry.

The Importance – Branding has taken on a greater significance in this decade as companies now see their brands as assets – as valuable and as tangible as their factories and patents.

The Challenge – Managing your identity so it is an accurate reflection of your company is an ongoing process. We believe strongly that brand management is the ultimate protector of profit margins. It's the cornerstone upon which brand equity is built.

5.

STRENGTHENING YOUR BRAND

You must create the brand and then communicate the brand to your customers and prospects. It's the same process for a billion-dollar company as for a small business. But, because a business may have fewer resources, it must approach the process in a different way than from a multinational company that may spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on focus groups and sophisticated surveys when developing a brand. And, B2B branding needs to be done properly to pull the right branding iron out of the fire.

Here's the roadmap that you should follow.

Immediate Goal – Align your image and identity

PHASE 1 – Learn what the market's perception is of your company

Review the facts and marketing information –

This step is especially important with existing brands that have been on the market for a long time.

In this phase, interview a select group of employees that are connected with your customers to gain their insights.

Discuss what each thinks are the strengths and weaknesses of the business.

Ask what they know about customers' perceptions –

- What is the exact sequence of events a customer encounters from first contact with your company to the ultimate buying decision?
- Why did they select your company versus your competitors?
- What do they like most about working with your company?
- How important were factors other than price in making their business decision?
- What initially attracted them to your company?

At this early stage, you really want to understand your customers and to answer several critical questions –

- How does your brand create value?
- Which dimensions of value are important?
- Which brand attributes are most important?

You should also review your competitors' branding efforts, paying close attention to their names, logos, slogans, theme lines and marketing materials.

After this interview, if you don't feel that you have a good picture of your customer, you may want to do a short customer survey with the same types of questions.

**TIP**

All the information you collect will guide you as to where to invest your money and resources in order to move the needle toward a more favorable brand position.

You want to walk away from this phase able to define exactly your target market and your customer profile. You want to establish a brand benchmark – where your customers have positioned your brand in the marketplace. In particular, you want a benchmark for overall –

- **Awareness** – Do customers know who you are and what your brand stands for?
- **Brand rating** – Do customers have a positive, negative or neutral reaction to your brand?
- **Competitive standing** – Where do customers position your brand in relation to competitive brands?

Next, prepare a timeline for your brand strategy and key action steps that will be taken to maximize the potential of your brand.

You will need to establish, update or fix your identity by developing unique brand elements.

Clarify the verbal brand – All the words – slogan, boilerplate description of the company, key copy points and all public-facing positioning statements – that communicate your brand message to customers. People tend to remember words more than visual images, so you need to wrap the right words around your brand.

Clarify the visual brand – For most B2B companies, the visual brand manifests itself through your Website, lead brochure, product literature, sales materials and ads. Make sure your visual brand supports your verbal brand.

Align your brand – Without alignment, your customers will hear mixed brand messages. You need to make sure that every contact point (any way, shape or form in which the customer comes into contact with your company, product or service) communicates a single, focused brand message.

Look at these identity factors –

Name / Signature – It should be memorable, distinctive and represented in a specific style using a special or unique font.

Logo / Icon – You probably have a logo, an icon that vividly expresses your brand's identity. It's a graphic image that provides a strong and recognizable element for your company. It is the core of the visual identity, and it's your first tangible step to creating your brand. Make sure your logo:

- Positions your company as a leader in your industry by updating your logo style to project a modern, high-end image.
- Create a unique logo mark (symbol) that differentiates your company and works equally well for all segments you represent.
- Update the font styling to appear more contemporary (of today) and easier to read.

**TIP**

Together, your logo mark and logo type must create a cohesive unit that presents your company as modern and powerful, and ultimately a leader in its industry.

Design a logo mark that reflects the strength and action qualities of your company, its product and services.

All successful logos have one thing in common, each is sleek and simple, without too much detail. Too much logo detail may not reproduce well on all mediums or the third time a document is copied or faxed.

Slogan – Create, refine or keep your slogan. It's a descriptive phrase that quickly distills the benefit you provide your customers.

It is used in conjunction with your logo as the primary identifier in communications. Through repetition in marketing material, the slogan reinforces the association of the company with the position. It's a value linked to your company. Good slogans tend to be short and specific. You will want to make sure that yours is as strong a brand promise as you can offer.

Taglines / Positioning Statements – Here's where you get to be a little more descriptive. Develop a series of short messages that express your products' and services' functional and emotional benefits. These statements succinctly and effectively describe your company using language that supports the brand.

Additional Considerations – Consider your registered trademarks and other symbols that will / are used to support your brand, product or service symbols and identity for your Website.

Visual Identity – What other elements do you want to carve out and use consistently to brand? All of your symbols and elements need unity in graphic design, this includes –

- **Typography** – Choose the specific fonts that will be used in all your materials and applications.
- **Color Palette** – Do a color study and select the primary colors to represent your company in all materials and applications. Also, select secondary colors will be used only as accents and are intended to provide special emphasis and flexibility in graphic design and communications.
- **Photography** – Select the style and type of photographs, illustrations and other images that are critical to present your brand. What is the main imagery you want to use in all your communications, such as groups, individuals, environment, still life, style and lighting?
- **Visual Style** – Adopt certain visual elements for both print and digital applications. These include elements such as – organic shapes, curves, lines, layering shapes and much more. This will create distinct and consistent visual representations of your brand.

PHASE 2 – Develop company identity and brand presentation guide

This document will paint a picture of how you want your company to look and sound. It will also provide the rationale behind the guidelines, describing your company's identity. For example, you may want to look and sound warm. Choose a color palette of earthy colors. The brand presentation guide would display the color palette and explain why it was chosen.



TIP

Success of using the guide, will hinge on employees understanding the value of consistency, and to recognize the benefits of using a clear identity.

In addition, it will package all the elements that will boost your identity with specific typography and graphic standards for all applications – print, electronic/digital and communications in a manual. By consistently applying the guidelines, everyone in your company will have an important role in protecting and strengthening your most important asset – your brand.

Short-term Goal – Develop materials to support your brand.

It's now time to do your advertising, marketing and communication activities. This will include traditional and new media marketing and communications materials such as packaging, ad content, promotional specialties, tradeshow booths, literature, Website and many more activities as planned.

Long-term Goal – Establish a strong brand over time through consistent efforts.

The message is chosen; marketing, advertising and public relations campaigns are busy promoting it. Generating an orderly and systematic buildup of support for your brand is important.

The mix of elements and environment make branding a complex and ongoing activity. You need to be consistently on the lookout to refine your methods to meet any new objectives, opportunities or obstacles.

At this point, you probably would like to know how to tell when you have a strong B2B brand. When you can answer a resounding YES to the following questions –

- Do you consistently communicate a clear, singular and relevant brand message?
- Do you consistently communicate a strong differentiation and value proposition?
- Do you consistently communicate a clear and compelling brand promise?

6.

BE THE BRAND!

You must take your branding seriously. And, this is good why?

Your organization must live the brand. There must be a direct connection between your brand and the customer's experience – when he / she walks in your door, talks to your sales team and purchases your products / services.

**TIP**

Just remember – brands live longer than products. They are dynamic, variable and influenced by competition. Flourishing brands promise specific benefits and deliver on them consistently. A brand equals trust.

And, it starts at the top. Your executives understand that applying brand strategy requires shared values throughout your company. From the production line to the front-line sales staff, every employee is responsible for helping to build the brand value.

Every business needs a brand champion – an individual charged with the authority to ensure that a consistent message crosses interdepartmental lines throughout the organization. The brand champion's foremost priority is consistency. To the extent that a company lacks consistency, the company loses the brand's perception of value and compromises its pledge of quality.

It takes an entire company to make a brand succeed! Everyone within the company must guard your brand by being a brand ambassador.

7.**THE CHANGED BRAND**

Once you set your brand on the right footing, you should make sure that you keep a healthy and strong brand by consistently focusing on –

- A differentiated value proposition, and
- Making sure it is articulated through a compelling and relevant brand promise.

By focusing on these two elements, your brand will easily and consistently stand out from the crowd.

Your customers eventually connect your company and its primary brand identifiers with a specific value or message. That connection is a powerful force that will increase the effectiveness of your marketing, lead to greater recognition among your customer base and result in more sales.

A stronger brand ultimately will lead to greater success for your B2B company! You now should be ready to help your brand move to the next level of success.