

The ABC's of Branding

A: Advance beyond average: Make the good decision to brand. Decide it makes business sense and it's important enough to hire an expert from outside.

B: Build your Identity: Begin with self assessment, Define your voice.

C: Control consistency: Once the brand/design/identity is established, proliferate consistently and strategically so all elements of your business' communications reinforce your position.

A: Advance Beyond Average

What is the experience someone has with your company? What are the associations someone has with your product or service. Over time these experiences and associations begin to form a symbolic representation.

“A brand represents a promise between the supplier and recipient, and this promise consists of the consumer's brand awareness in terms of the emotional and perceptory quality derived from the recipient's totality of experience.” (Minamiyama: Branding Design)

Effective branding design helps to define this experience by communicating in visual form, the tone of voice, attitude, quality, and culture associated with a company's product or service.

Most businesses in demand don't have an average product or service. Yet, so many companies settle for average marketing design solutions. Average branding design anchors your organization in a sea of homogeneity and generally wastes your marketing dollars. People vaguely remember you- if they remember you at all. Company leaders who make the decision to advance beyond average, choose professional branding design. When done right, your target market will strongly associate your company with the specific positioning context you have established (things like performance bikes or innovative business solutions). Effective branding design jumps off the shelf or page, differentiates your product or service from the rest, and makes your company stand out. People remember you, for the right reasons.

Many companies in the market today do reasonably well on product development and distribution, but fall flat on their face when it comes to branding. Failure to understand the importance and potential of ones brand identity can cause your company to fail. The three reasons well-intentioned companies settle for average and slip into mediocrity.

1) A prevailing attitude that marketing is a bonus category, that thing you do after all the more important things.

“This is because the organization and budgetary systems of most companies still seem to be based on a value chain which prioritizes efficiency of production and distribution, without encouraging the creation of individual or integrated brand expression.” (Minamiyama)

Operational efficiency is great, but it is the totality of the customer's experience, including branding design, that determines how your product or service is perceived, embraced, or rejected.

2) Business owners see marketing as an amorphous category with an intangible return on investment. In fact, marketing dollars can generate anywhere from .54 cents to \$17 dollars of sales revenue for every marketing dollar spent (ROI stats as reported by The New York Times and The Brand Builder Blog). That works out to be a return of 54-1700%. If branding didn't pay dividends, you wouldn't see companies like Apple, Nike, and Subaru allocating major budget dollars to their marketing programs. They understand that a great product deserves a great marketing campaign. You have to strategically trumpet your product to reach your target customers in as many viable ways as possible.

3) Trying to do it on your own. A commonly held attitude is: "I've been to a number of art museums, have a good eye, and own a recent version of Photoshop. Doesn't that make me qualified to design my own marketing program?" There are two points worth addressing here. Firstly, don't sacrifice your brand equity by reaching beyond your own area of expertise. Stick to what you do well and add value to your business with expert treatment in communications design. Secondly, accept that there are some things you can't do effectively for yourself. A smart attorney will not defend himself in court. A surgeon will not operate on his own wife. You are just too close to your own business. At a certain point, it makes sense to bring in a branding expert.

Once you have made up your mind that your product or service deserves to be communicated at the highest level, you will advance beyond average and hire a qualified branding consultant. A professionally designed brand identity will communicate your true message. You want to brand in a way that's smart and authentic. That's where an independent consultant can save you budget dollars and deliver the quality message your company deserves.

B. Build your Identity: "You can't get to where you want to go, if you don't know where you're going."

The first stage in building your brand identity is comprehensive self-assessment. You will reap the most benefits from your branding efforts if you honestly engage in the self brand audit process.

The first chapter of Sun Tzu's Art of War is entitled Considerations and Estimations for War (Kaufman). The leader must take stock of himself and the task before him before leading his men into war.

"A warlord must appear to be all things to all men, but first he must be true to himself and not permit indecisiveness to rule his destiny. There can be no room for indecision and nothing less than full commitment to the ideal. These principles must be grounded in the heart."

The strategic assessment process delivers an outline of what, why and where you are going. It creates a road map for your success and it illustrates milestones that will keep you on track throughout the process. There are a number of questions you will want to ask yourself. What does your new brand voice say about you? How should it be articulated? Should it communicate performance, authenticity, friendly expertise, or perhaps all three? The key is to define what will happen as a result of driving your brand.

After the strategic assessment, you're in good shape to proceed to creative expression of your brand. This is the fun part. What does it look like, sound like, and feel like? All efforts should be focused on developing an approach that is authentic, drives success, and making an indelible impression with the people who will encounter your brand.

Goss Engineering is a super-technical engineering firm. Goss recognized the need to differentiate their company from the array of competing engineering firms. They brought in BETRUE to steer their re-branding effort. Through a careful strategic assessment process, BETRUE established friendly expertise as the Goss' tone of voice.

The brand was applied consistently through photography, copy and elemental design components. All effectively conveyed an amiable quality and an approachable personality for a technical service. BETRUE successfully positioned Goss as an engineering firm driven by people who truly enjoy their work and are dedicated to sustainable practices.

Branding creates an emotional connection between the core of your business and your customers. Effective branding design has a powerful impact on how your business is perceived and whether your company is easily recognized in the local community. Ideally, your brand should be clear upon the first impression and remain consistent across all points of contact.

C: Control Consistency

Brand marks (logos), photography, copy, and colors are the blocks that make up your brand. Consistency is the glue that holds the blocks together. Let's look at some specific ways you can build consistency into your brand.

1) Provide the same tone of voice in all your marketing copy.

Good marketing copy should be linked to your strategic plan. Your copy can be written in business formal approach or in an informal, familiar style. Whatever the tone established, do not mix writing styles. If it's formal, keep it formal. If it's informal, reproduce the same tone across all the various media channels required.

2) Utilize photos that have a similar style to them.

Building consistency with photography can be done by using similar crops, shot angles, lighting, or the subject matter itself. If for example, you need photography for a fashion catalog of cocktail hats, you could choose close-up shots in high-contrast black and white photos.

3) Select colors and type faces that echo throughout your layouts.

Repetition is usually something to be avoided. However, with the visual elements of a brand, reinforcement is a good thing. It establishes the attitude and aesthetics articulating your brand voice. Once you have decided on the colors of your brand, you will want to stick to these in all collateral materials and website pages. It's OK to add some supplemental colors, but using too many colors will quickly cause confusion and dilute your brand.

Be careful not to use too many fonts. Doing so will bring your brand into circus territory. This is OK, only if circus is what you need to convey. If not, select two or three fonts and stick to them. While suitable for titles and subheadings, fancy or overly edgy fonts are not to be used for body

copy you want read. Ideally the fonts you use on your business card are the same typefaces used on your catalog, brochure, and print ads.

While building your brand you may be able to do without certain extras like metallic inks on your brochure or motion graphics on your website. However, the one thing you can't do without is consistency. By bringing consistency to brand colors, font choices, copy style, and photos, you integrate your brand voice and solidify your impressions. If all of the above elements work together, you are well on your way to building a strong brand.

Remember the ABC's of branding. Advance beyond average by making the smart decision to hire a professional branding design firm. Build your identity by engaging in a strategic assessment process. Control consistency in the application of your brand throughout your company's communication media. Lastly, be sure to re-evaluate your branding design every three to five years. Your brand represents your company values, culture, attitude and tone of voice. As your business grows and your acuity evolves, you want your brand to evolve with you. Keep it fresh!