

# Branding: the basics

## *Introduction*

Every business wants to be a customer's **first choice**. Building and managing a brand can play a significant part in making that happen.

Brands give potential customers a firm idea of what they're buying before they buy it, making the purchasing decision easier. And existing **customers trust strong brands** because they know what to expect.

Brands aren't just for big companies - they can make smaller businesses **stand out** from the crowd, particularly in competitive markets.

If you want to build and manage a brand, you'll need to focus on what your customers want and how you can guarantee to deliver it. You'll need to be consistent in your service and every other point of contact customers have with you - for example, phone calls, letters, faxes etc.

## *First steps for creating a brand*

Successful branding is about promoting your **strengths**. Start by thinking about what you're **good at** and what you **believe in** as a business. For example:

- particular skills - such as excellence in design
- high-quality customer service
- providing the best value for money in your marketplace

You need to be sure that you can always deliver your strengths, sometimes referred to as "**brand values**".

## *What customers want*

You also need to match these brand values to your **customers' requirements**.

What **drives** your customers? What **makes them buy**? In most cases, it's not only about price or performance.

Ask **existing** customers what they like about doing business with you. And asking **potential** customers what they look for in their buying decisions can also give you useful information to help **develop** your business - and your brand.

If your brand values are in line with what existing and potential customers look for when they're buying, you've got the beginnings of a useful brand and you're ready to start building it.

But if they're not, you'll probably need to **reconsider** either the benefits you offer to your present customers or whether you're targeting the right people.

For example, a clothes shop that has high fashion as a brand value can capitalise on it if its customers and potential customers want to buy the trendiest gear. But if its customer base is made up of pensioners, it's unlikely those brand values will be in line with its customers' buying needs.

## ***Building your brand***

Once you've defined your brand values and your customers' needs you can start to build your brand by **consistently communicating** your brand values.

Remember that **every possible contact** you have with a customer or potential customer needs to reinforce your brand values.

Key areas to consider are:

- your business name
- names you give your products or services
- any slogan you use
- your logo
- the style and quality of your stationery
- product packaging
- your premises
- where and how you advertise
- how you and your employees dress
- how you and your employees behave
- your company website

If all these are consistently in line with your brand values, your brand will be **strengthened**. But if all of them aren't in line, your brand - and your business - could be seriously damaged. A brand makes promises to customers and if they aren't fulfilled, your customers will be far less likely to buy again.

For example, Delightful Jewellery's "Elegant" range may be beautifully produced, stylishly packaged and glamorously advertised in glossy magazines. Its brand values could be "classy, special, elegant". But if staff are rude on the phone, customers won't think about Delightful Jewellery's elegance - they'll think about its staff's rudeness. As a result the brand - and possibly the business - will be undermined.

## ***Managing your brand***

It's a good idea to get one person to take responsibility for your brand - if you can't do it yourself, appoint an employee instead.

In most businesses, employees play a crucial part in managing your brand because how they act has a powerful impact on what customers think of you. If your employees believe in what your brand stands for, they'll be able to communicate it much more effectively to customers.

Keep employees involved by setting up a **suggestion scheme**, or regularly taking the time to discuss your brand and how your business is performing.

Continually reinforce the message that what they do is important. And make sure they know that breaking the promises to customers that your brand makes - even just once - can damage the brand and your business.

## ***Outside your business***

Get **regular feedback** from customers to find out if your business delivers the promises your brand makes. Ask dissatisfied customers or former customers as well - you can gain valuable information from them about how your brand is perceived. Honest and constructive criticism can help you see where there's room for improvement.

Remember that customers change too. See the page in this guide on [reviewing your brand](#) for details of how regular reviews help you ensure that your brand still matches their needs and preferences. Even the most traditional brands have to stay relevant to their customers.

## ***Reviewing your brand***

A successful brand can have a long life, provided it's kept up-to-date and in line with customers' needs and expectations. As your customers' needs change, your brand - and your business - need to evolve to stay relevant.

Does everything work as well as it can to deliver what your customer expects? Does your customer have the same expectations of your business, product or service? Has your market-place changed?

In particular, it's worth examining:

- your products and services
- your systems
- your marketing strategy

**For example**, during such a review, Speedy Couriers may find more of its customers are using email to deliver documents quickly, rather than a bike. However, it could reposition its brand to emphasise reliability as well as speed - that it can be relied on to deliver documents into recipients' hands as quickly as possible.

And if it's possible to set up a system to contact customers by phone, fax or email immediately after delivery, it could market itself as the fastest, guaranteed solution for delivery of documents directly into recipients' hands, offering customers peace of mind.

But if a review suggests you need to make changes, it's important to go right back to the basics - how does your business, product or service meet your customers' needs? Any changes that don't answer this question are likely to lead to a brand that means little to its customers.

## ***Growth opportunities***

Reviews can also provide an opportunity to develop a business. For example, Speedy Couriers could also find that its added emphasis on reliability could be used to extend into new markets, such as say transporting other businesses' cash to banks.

## ***Budgeting for a brand***

Creating and managing a brand can cost you as little or as much as you want it to. The cost of your time to set it up and manage it is the only area of expenditure that is guaranteed.

But it's a good idea to set a **budget**, otherwise it's easy to spend money unnecessarily. A budget will **focus the mind** and force you to **prioritise** your spending on your branding effort.

The **key areas** you could budget for are:

- design needs, such as a logo, signage, business stationery or product packaging
- your premises
- your advertising
- time you'll need to spend with employees to make sure they understand your brand
- any resources you'll have to provide for employees to enable them to carry out what the brand promises
- changes to your company website

You don't need to do everything at once. As long as employees understand and deliver what your brand promises, it stands a good chance of success. Stationery, logos, packaging and advertising can follow later if the budget is tight. But it's worth planning to bring them into line within a reasonable period of time to give your customers a **visual representation** of what your brand means.

### ***Ten tips on branding***

1. Focus on what your business achieves for its customers. Your brand is no good to you if it isn't delivering what customers want.
2. Take ownership of your brand. Pay attention to customers' needs, but you should still control what you want your brand to mean to them.
3. Be honest. If you don't believe in your brand, no one else will.
4. Keep your brand simple. Focus on a small number of key brand values.
5. Be consistent. Every aspect of your business should make customers feel the same way about you.
6. Be thorough. Look at all your systems to make sure they help to support your brand.
7. Involve employees. Make sure they understand your brand and believe in it.
8. Communicate your brand. Make sure every advertisement, brochure and letter helps reinforce the same message. If you have a logo, use it everywhere.
9. Meet and exceed what your brand promises. Failing, just once, will damage your brand.
10. Manage your brand. Continually look for opportunities to make improvements. And don't be afraid to make changes to reflect shifts in the way you do business or new trends in your market.