

SUCCESSFUL BRANDING FOR SMEs

Then

Branding (from Teutonic brinnan, to burn), was first a mode of punishment using a hot iron to scar the body so that criminals could be recognized. It became a method of marking ownership of goods or animals with a hot iron.

Branding is still here to differentiate one thing from another and it is still about 'mental shelf space' or recognition of something.

Now

But these days it is more - it is about 'emotional shelf space' too.



Now it is about describing a company or product or service's core tangible & intangible attributes, values, character, expectations and reputation both before and after purchase to anyone in the defined audiences for the brand.

Defined audiences may include employees, distributors and consumers.

Describing this multi dimensional 'personality' of a brand involves creating a positive visual, emotional, rational and cultural image using a name, packaging, colours, symbols, straplines, music etc. etc.

The purpose is to ensure that more individuals 'develop a relationship' with the brand, remember it better than competitors and feel they have received greater value and satisfaction by buying 'their brand'.

Your brand is what identifies your business to consumers. It resides in your customers and prospect's hearts and minds - it is all their experiences and perceptions. Good branding results in loyal customers. It is well known that existing customer relationships are the key to profitability. So it's no wonder that branding is a major marketing goal.

Kieron Matthews, the IAB's head of marketing has said about branding: "I have always worked from the point of view that my role in advertising is a glorified filer. I have to ensure that my target audience has my brand (e.g. a McDonald's Burger) filed right at the front of the fast food part of the restaurant section that sits in their brain. By keeping it so front of mind, you can be sure that there will only ever be one winner when your consumer is faced with the perennial Whopper Vs Big Mac choice."

Your feelings about a company or product or service can be shaped by just word of mouth: the rule that says one unhappy customer tells twenty to thirty people. But a brand, as we have noted, is not just about that 'mental shelf space' or 'brand perception' built up by advertising or word of mouth. It is the sum of all experiences from first hearing about the product to purchase to repeat purchase to customer service etc. It is created from a series of experiences, from every interaction over the lifetime of the relationship with each adding to or subtracting from the 'brand experience'.

Can smaller companies create a successful brand?

Well, they need to do so whether they know it or not - because of the 'brand experience' phenomenon. As just noted, every interaction over the lifetime of the relationship is what creates the brand with each adding to or subtracting from the 'brand experience'.

Patrick Hanlon, CEO of branding company Thinktopia suggests seven "pieces of primal code" that go into making a great brand:

- **the creation story** - where you come from is as important for people to know as what you believe
- **the creed** - defining, understanding and communicating your mission to employees and customers
- **the icon** - graphic or other representation that clearly shows who they are and what they stand for
- **the rituals** - the repeated interaction that people have with your business and how you handle those interactions
- **dealing with nonbelievers** - by defining the pagans, you define who and what you are not
- **the sacred words** - the words that you must know to belong within that group e.g. 'skinny latte' or 'death kitty' or 'emily the strange'
- **leadership** - successful brands have a person who is the catalyst, the risk taker, the visionary

Never underestimate the power of story, says Hanlon. "Take **Pom Wonderful** who have less than 100 staff" he says, "its Web site includes an entire history of the company and the pomegranate itself. All brands are a narrative; the story is what draws us in".



Once customers are in, it's a company's value system or creed that keeps them coming back. Take **Blue Banana** who specialize in alternative clothing, band merchandise, fashion accessories and body jewellery and have just 11 stores plus their webstore. Their creed is: "... to allow you to join in with others who have a similar view about life to you. Your culture and music remains at the core of everything Blue Banana does, everything is influenced by your music."

These companies and others like them have spent a lot of effort in creating their brands and realize that it can be destroyed very quickly. They have defined what their organization must do to support their brand values.

This has paid off in increased sales and profitability which has been shown to be the case time and again - brand savvy companies have better growth, profits and shareholder returns.

However, a Microsoft survey showed that over a third of UK small businesses admit to having no brand values and those companies with between one and ten employees were the least likely to have built a brand, with a disturbing 58 per cent of this group shunning the creation and communication of brands within the business.

So, if those companies are willing to be persuaded here are some of the things they could do:

- **Define the business' personality:**
 - How do you want to be perceived?



- What is it that makes your product or service desirable?
 - Why should customers choose to come to you instead of your competitors?
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- **Be consistent**, ensure the same values, messages and visions are communicated to all of your staff and make sure they act on them.
 - **Build recognition**, ensure your brand designs and rituals are found at all 'customer touch points'.
 - **Make the most of what you've got**. One of the most effective yet simple ways to have a strong brand presence is through your website. Although seven out of ten small firms have a business website, half of them are not using it for marketing purposes.