

There are so many misconceptions about branding. It's really no wonder so many businesses crash and burn. **Bloomberg says a staggering 80 percent of entrepreneurs will fail within the first 18 months of operation.** While there are many reasons success may be out of reach (lack of funding, a faulty product, bad processes, poor profit margins, even worse sales), we're firm believers in the idea that great branding can be a panacea of sorts, helping to heal all entrepreneurial wounds – at least for a little while. Branding isn't a cure-all, but meticulously and thoughtfully going through the steps required to set up and flush out a new brand identity will go a long way towards helping you understand not only your business but also yourself. And that's a pretty big deal.

So, about that process... where in the world should we start?

It's simple: we'll start at the beginning.

Who are You?



Let's get one thing straight: your brand isn't synonymous with your business, it's a way of defining what your business is, not just to consumers but also to yourself. Your business is a collection of numbers, a P&L sheet, a budget, a bank account. It's cold, hard data wrapped in statistical models and strategy sessions. People don't care about businesses.

Your brand, on the other hand, is your image and reputation. It's how you tell people who you are – and who your business is – in a way that truly resonates. Branding gives customers something to care about. It's temporary traction to keep your audience's attention while you build a long-lasting rapport based on things like social media interaction, customer service, and consumer-oriented content marketing.

▶ So ask yourself these questions:

WHO IS YOUR CUSTOMER BASE?

HOW ARE YOU HELPING THEM SOLVE A PROBLEM?

WHO ARE YOU COMPETING AGAINST?

WHAT MAKES THOSE COMPETITORS UNIQUE?

WHAT ARE YOU OFFERING THAT'S DIFFERENT?

WHAT KIND OF PERSONALITY DO YOU WANT YOUR BRAND TO PROJECT?

IS WHAT YOU'RE OFFERING AUTHENTIC?

HOW DO YOU WANT YOUR TARGET CUSTOMER TO FEEL
WHEN THEY INTERACT WITH YOUR BRAND?

(You'll notice that we didn't mention your logo, the font on your signage, your Facebook banner, or your website's color scheme. Those are all manifestations of your brand, not things that make up the brand itself. Make sense?)

Once you've written down detailed answers to each question, boil the whole mess down into two sentences you love. That is now your branding bible. When in doubt, refer back. **This is your brand's moral compass; thou shalt not forget who you decided you were.**

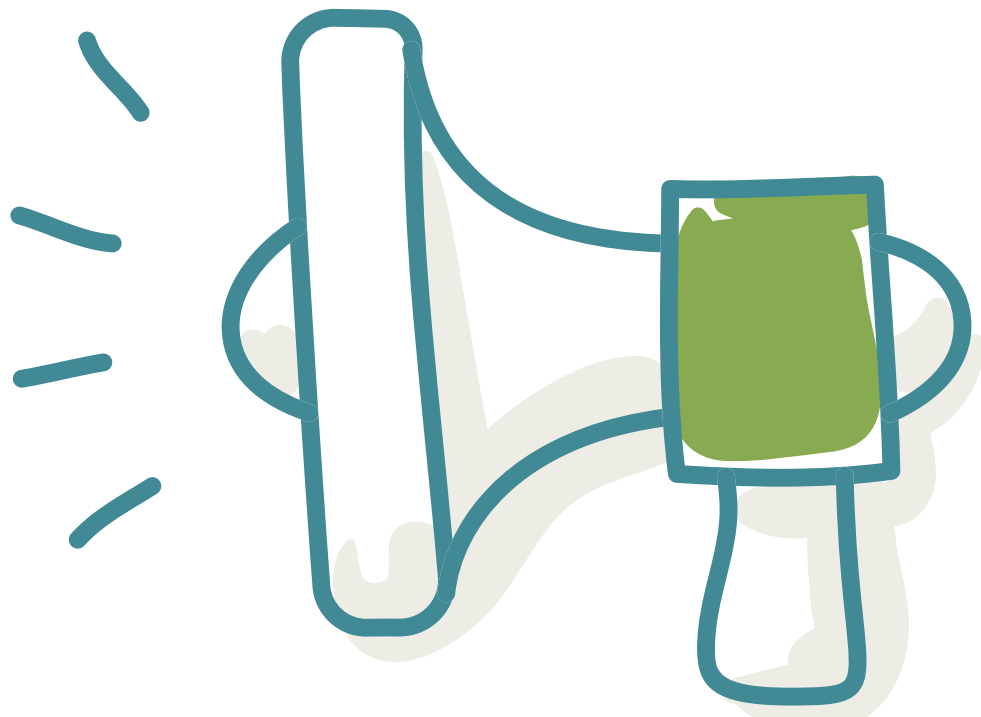
Be Passionate About Your Brand

If you don't 100 percent believe in what your brand is about and where your company is going, either change the direction or get it.

We're serious. Drop everything, sell off your assets, post a message on social media thanking everyone for their support, and move on. Brands can only survive when they develop a customer base that's as crazy about the company's services and/or products as the people in charge are, and customers are like sharks – they're remarkably adept at smelling blood in the water. Just a drop of doubt in even a million-dollar company can smell up your entire network.

On the other hand, passion is contagious. How many startups have convinced a skeptical investor to invest simply because the pitch was so fervent, so intense, so borderline fanatical that it was difficult not to be swept up in the vision? Even the jaded experts on Shark Tank occasionally take a chance on something as mundane as a brightly colored all-purpose sponge, in no small part because the entrepreneur doing the pitch was clearly going to go the distance.

One angel investor participating in a study of how passion affects investment made a good point: "Too much passion is dangerous because it equates to tunnel vision." Believe in your concept but make sure you're not losing sight of reality.



Scale Slowly to Achieve Success

Where do you want to be in 5 years? There's a reason that question is asked in pretty much every interview in every industry. Ten years is too far away, and a mere 12 months in a lifetime of employment (or, in this case, entrepreneurial opportunity) isn't a big enough sample size to really matter. We'll say it again, in simpler terms: a year is nothing. While it's both admirable and even inspirational to aim for multiple franchises or 500 percent growth in just a year, you have to be realistic. **If that happens organically, that's great, but it still poses a host of potential branding problems:**



Brand Confusion: The more people you bring in, the more your brand messaging becomes diluted. Each new employee brings their own experiences, biases, belief systems, and ideas about how things should operate. Smart hiring and a comprehensive training program help immensely, but if you're growing too quickly, human resources is one of the first departments to feel the strain.



Sales Over Customer Satisfaction: Money is awesome. No one starts a business hoping to just break even, but when your business grows quicker than expected the invoices, packing slips, tracking numbers, budget issues, and other financial concerns grow equally fast. Get too mired in that mess and you won't even notice when you start switching customer favorites for cheaper substitutes.



The Forest For the Trees: Remember your branding mantra? When you're suddenly managing multiple locations, tons of employees, and requests from all the morning shows (hey, you're shooting for the stars here, right?) all your time is being taken up by the results instead of the process. Your brand is the process. It's all about the journey – if you're building your brand correctly, you're never quite done.

Institute a Trickle-Down Culture

By this point in our dialogue on branding, you've at least thought about what makes your brand your brand, you've been reminded about the importance of passion, and why growing quickly isn't as important as growing right.

Now, teach that to everyone else. Lead by example and show your employees why the brand identity you've established is important, viable, unique, and worthwhile.

Help them embody your principles and demonstrate how branding can trickle down even to the tiniest operational items like choosing their computer's screen saver or how they act when they're at the company softball game.

The trickle-down idea works for customers, too. By using brand-forward promotional materials and remaining consistent (more on that in just a minute) in how you talk about, showcase, and live your brand, you're giving customers something substantial to grab onto – and if you're lucky, you're giving them an attitude worthy of copying, too such as the brand Nike "Just Do It" attracted millions of customers to follow their brand culture. Like them or not, the Kardashians are masters of branding; it's pretty clear who they are and what contour kit they'd like you to buy.



Stay Consistent

A brand is only valuable when it's consistent. Regardless of who within your company is speaking to consumers or the channel via which the message is being distributed or even the type of message being used, the basic premise has to be eternally consistent.



Ways to fail:

OFFER ONE TAGLINE ON PRINT MATERIALS AND ANOTHER ONLINE

HAVE ONE SALES PERSON OFFER A CLIENT ONE DEAL WHILE ANOTHER SAYS IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

USE SEVERAL VERSIONS OF ONE COLOR SCHEME OR LOGO

USE A GENERIC, FORGETTABLE MISSION STATEMENT

CONFLATE THE IDEA OF VARIETY WITH GENERATING INTEREST

Norm and the gang went to Cheers because it's a place where everybody knew their name, but also because it was a place of relative sameness and comfort. If the bar had changed staff every day or frequently swapped out signage, there's a very good chance we all would've watched a much less interesting show called Chili's or Applebee's, because those are brands that, while not terribly unique, are at least consistent.

Remember:

You're never too small to have a brand. In fact, smaller businesses with brilliant branding cast exponentially larger shadows. Go ahead – cast a big shadow! Branding is both pre-set and ever-changing. You can put the basic structure of your brand into place, but everything you do as time goes on reflects on and changes your brand, too. The changes might be microscopic at first, but they're there, and if they're negative the cracks in your foundation will eventually make themselves known. Always be authentic. You may be able to fake a moment, but you can't fake your whole life.

