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# Principles of Branding



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*INTRODUCTION*

**Introduction**

What is Branding?

**Chapter 1**

Start Building Your Brand

**Chapter 2**

Brand Strategy

**Chapter 3**

Brand Equity

**Chapter 4**

Delivering On Brand Promise

# What is Branding?

In a nutshell, your brand is your promise to consumers. It's who you are, not as a person but as a company. It's the why behind your business. What do we mean by that?

There's a concept called the "golden circle," first expressed by marketing guru Simon Sinek. It's a way of organizing your company's priorities to make your product and your message compelling to consumers.

In the center of the circle is your "why." Your "why" is your reason for being — and "to turn a profit" doesn't count. Why does your company exist? Why do you go to work every day? And why should anyone care?

The next layer out is the "how." The "how" of any brand is how your product is different or better from its competition. Whether you call it a "differentiating value proposition" or a "unique selling proposition" or something else, it's what sets you apart from everyone else in your space.

The outermost layer is "what." The "what" is simple — it's what you do. Maybe you make laptops, maybe you sell Italian food, maybe you build houses. The "what" is easy to identify, but it's the least important piece of the puzzle.

Let's take the clothing company Patagonia, for example.

The "why" is environmental activism. Patagonia is focused on "using business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis." [It's in their mission statement.](#) It's their very reason for being.

How is Patagonia doing this? By focusing on sustainability and environmental consciousness in every aspect of their company, from manufacturing to recycled materials to political campaigning to charitable donations. Patagonia lives their "why" in every step of their process.

So what's the "what?" That's the easy part: Patagonia makes clothing, from casual wear to cutting-edge outdoor gear that can handle the harshest of

climates.

Patagonia isn't the only company making premium outdoor clothing, and they're certainly not the only ones making cotton button-down tees. The "what" is not what makes them stand out from the crowd. It's the "why."

## *Why Does My Business Need Branding?*

The simple fact of the matter is that to succeed, you can't just make something that people need. You need something for customers to associate with you besides just what you make. There are plenty of companies and brand names out there with no real distinction from each other, and they blend together as a result.

Think about toothpaste. Crest spends [over \\$100 million a year](#) on advertising, not to mention the money spent on strategy and marketing. But can you really articulate what makes Crest different from Colgate? They're both just toothpaste, and when you're standing in the grocery store, you'll probably buy whichever one is on sale at the moment.

But you can tell me what makes Tom's of Maine toothpaste different from Crest or Colgate. Tom's has a reason for being, a mission, and principles to drive that mission. That mission doesn't have to be lofty — natural ingredients and sustainable business practices — but it's something that Tom's has made their own.

## **Chapter One: Start Building Your Brand**

Start with why. Think back to the golden circle again — we're going to bring that up a lot on this page. Figure out your "why," and the rest will follow from there.

Who are you? What's important to you, both as a person and as a business? What are you trying to achieve? What is your company's mission?

Think about what your company does or provides, and what you want

to accomplish by providing it. Are you trying to make sure everyone has access to toothpaste with natural ingredients? Are you trying to reduce the environmental impact of the clothing industry?

What do your existing customers think about your company, and is that different from how you want to be thought of? When cognac brand Remy Martin was founded in 1724, it's safe to assume they never expected their 1738 brand to be mentioned in rap songs. But in 2010, they embraced their new image and made rapper T.I. an official Global Creative Consultant for the brand.

Part of building your brand is building buyer personas. After all, whatever your mission is, you want to market to people who share those goals and embrace your ideals. A buyer persona is an idealized image of your ideal customer, so think about who that is. Think about other brands for help — is the average Harley-Davidson owner the same kind of person as the average Prius owner? Of course not.

Collect data about your existing customers — things like age, job, income level, interests, what problems they're trying to solve, etc. Is that who you want them to be? Or are you going in a new direction that requires building a new persona to direct your marketing efforts toward. Obviously, not every single customer will fit your persona (or personas, depending on the size and breadth of your business). But you're not marketing to everyone, you're marketing to a core group. Give some thought to who that core group is.

## **Chapter Two: Brand Strategy**

It's easy to confuse brand building with brand strategy, but you can't have a strategy without a strong foundation to build it on. Once you've built your brand and established a basic understanding of who you are and who you're talking to, you can start to plan a strategy to implement it.

### *You Need A Logo*

Some logos are simple and some are more complex, but you need

something you can put on virtually everything your company puts out. Be creative — BMW’s logo isn’t a car and Southwest’s logo isn’t an airplane.

Your logo isn’t just an image, it’s an introduction to your brand. It should evoke the same ideas that you want the brand itself to evoke. If you’re elegant and professional, your logo should be too.

If you’re just starting out, you’ll probably need to include the name of your company in the logo. Some companies use the name and logo separately — like Apple and Pepsi — allowing the symbol portion to be used on its own in some contexts. Some, like Ford, have the text baked right into the logo. And some, like FedEx and Ray-Ban, are just a wordmark.

As much as you might like the look, you’ll have to get pretty famous before you can start using the symbol portion of your logo without the wordmark to go with. That means you’ll need to pick a wordmark with a font that matches the look and feel of your company and logo in general.

And this should go without saying, but don’t pick a logo that looks just like someone else’s. It’s fine to look around the industry to see what styles your competitors are using and gain some inspiration, but the last thing you need is to be served with a cease-and-desist when someone notices how similar your logos are.

### *Think About Brand Messaging*

Brand messaging refers to every image and piece of copy that your brand puts out — taglines, ad slogans, blog titles, headlines, sales pitches, even how your customer service reps answer the phone.

No matter what form your messaging takes, it all comes back to your “why” — what your brand stands for, how it stands apart from its competitors, and why it matters. Your core brand message will inform all subsequent messaging — ad slogans or taglines might take a different form from the core message, but what matters is that all of your messaging describes aspects of your brand that are relevant to clients.

When creating your brand messaging, think about a few different criteria. Does your brand message differentiate you from the other brands in your space? Is your messaging easy to understand?

Is your messaging realistic? It's one thing to be aspirational, but it's another to make pie-in-the-sky claims that have no basis in what your brand actually does. Keep it realistic and your messaging will be much more credible.

### *What Does Your Brand Sound Like?*

Once you've established what your brand is saying, it's time to think about how you're saying it. This is generally referred to as voice and tone, and it's going to be integrated top to bottom.

Your brand's voice and tone will range from the mundane, minor details — 8 a.m. vs 8 AM, August 24 vs August 24th, whether or not to use the Oxford comma, and so on — to much broader and more obvious things about the way you convey your message.

Think of your brand as a person. How does that person talk? Do they use long sentences and big words, or do they keep it brief? Do they use swear words? Do they poke fun at anyone? Do they make jokes about themselves or are they self-serious?

Think long and hard about how your brand wants to come off, and establish guidelines for everyone in your company who communicates with the outside world. Like it or not, customers will start to think of your brand like a person, and they'll notice when a piece of messaging "doesn't sound like you." If Dove deodorant said on the label that it was going to "punch body odor in its stupid face," you'd think that was bizarre. If Old Spice said it? Par for the course.

Your voice and tone will apply in every single piece of outward-facing collateral, from your web copy, mission statement, and social media posts to your customer service reps, how you answer the phone, and every email you send. Consistency is paramount.

## *Where Does It Make Sense For You To Be?*

People use a lot of social media platforms – [the average American is signed up for at least three social media sites](#) – but that doesn't mean that you need to maintain a brand presence on every site.

Not only would it be a huge investment – it takes time and money to properly maintain accounts on social media – but some sites just aren't going to fit with your brand. If you deal in high-end real estate, sites that deal in quick takes and fleeting attention like Twitter and Snapchat probably aren't going to help you. If you sell software, then the visual-oriented sites like Instagram and Pinterest don't fit the bill.

The exception is Facebook. Facebook is so big – [over two billion monthly active users](#) – and so variegated that every business should be keeping up a Facebook page. Facebook's targeting is so comprehensive that it's easy to exist in your own target markets' microcosm – spending money on the people who might be interested in you and ignoring everyone else.

Thinking about where you belong extends to advertising too – and not just the social media kind. If your target market skews young and tech-savvy, then magazine and newspaper ads may not be the best way to reach them. If they skew wealthy, they're probably not riding mass transit. Think about who you're talking to and what their lives are like to decide where to put ads.

And don't be too literal. Let's say you're running a brewery. You're advertising to beer drinkers on social media and in all the right magazines. But you know who else loves beer? Cyclists, climbers, and other outdoorsy people. Think about sponsoring a cyclocross race or an obstacle course. Partner with local climbing gyms. The more touch points you can have with your customers, the better.

Finally, think about influencer marketing. Does it make sense for your brand? When it comes to influencers, [authenticity is crucial](#), so make sure you can pull it off in a genuine, believable way.

If you make a product that people can take out in the real world and show off — clothing, a piece of tech, a personal accessory — then by all means, find an influencer who will do your product justice on social media. If you can't, or you think it'll look forced, then leave that channel alone.

### *Always Be Consistent*

We've mentioned this a few times throughout this article, but it's important. Your brand — the way you look, sound, and act — must be the same everywhere it touches the outside world. From your website to your business cards, everything you do should be informed by your brand.

Make a brand guidelines document and distribute it to everyone at the company who makes anything outward-facing. Address things like which logos to use, their size and placement, and whether they can be altered. Establish company colors, complete with color codes in RGB, CMYK, and maybe Pantone. Make a list of which fonts should be used, when a choice is available.

When your brand posts an image on social media, what kind of image does it use? Dark and gritty or bright and clean? Saturated colors or muted tones? Which Instagram filters do you use, and which do you avoid?

Talk about language. Do you refer to the people in your company as employees or team members, or maybe “sandwich artists” (thanks, Subway)? Do you have clients, customers, or guests? All these variations carry their own implications, so it's important to know which you plan to use.

Finally, spell out your buyer persona and target markets. Lots of companies even create a fictional person. If you run a brewery, maybe you make a biography of “Brewery Bob.”

Bob likes breweries with new varietals on tap, and buys 22-oz bombers in the store rather than six-packs. Bob makes over \$50,000 and buys tickets to the Great American Beer Festival every year. Bob doesn't shave his face, buys organic groceries, and reads the New York Times. We made this one up, but

it's the type of thing you should be thinking about.

## Chapter Three: Brand Equity

You might be wondering why all of this is so important. Why do you need to put so much energy into establishing your brand and making it consistent? The answer is brand equity. Brand equity is the set of values and liabilities that consumers associate with your brand name, and it greatly informs how they interact with you.

Maintaining brand equity allows you to own a greater mind and market share of the space your business occupies. You want to be on the top of your customers' mind – when they think of your industry, they think of you.

When you think of a chocolate sandwich cookie with a cream filling, you think of Oreo. Dozens, if not hundreds, of other name-brand and generic versions of that cookie exist, but Oreo's brand equity is far stronger than theirs.

The Brand Asset Valuator, developed by Young and Rubicam, is a good start for determining your brand equity using four criteria:

- **Differentiation.** How does your brand stand out from others? This doesn't just have to be about product differentiation – Arc'teryx and Patagonia both make premium outdoor clothing, but only Patagonia can claim the reputation for being as eco-conscious as possible.
- **Relevance.** Is your distinction relevant? Is what you bring to the table actually useful to today's consumers? History is littered with brands that were different, but not in a way that anyone cared about. Do you remember what made Saturn cars stand out from the crowded car market? Neither does anyone else.
- **Esteem.** How do people think of your brand and, by extension, your company? Are you popular, or enjoyed by a niche group of enthusiasts? Are you reputable, or are your products liable to fail? Do you keep your promises, or do your corporate goals seem to change on a whim?

There's a big difference in perceived quality between Beats headphones and Audio-Technica, or between LaCroix and store-brand sparkling water. Why? Those brands have put a huge amount of effort into building and maintaining brand equity.

## Chapter Four: Delivering On Brand Promise

So you've put the work in to craft, define, and establish a brand, and you're putting that brand out in the world through everything you do. Now for the hard part: sticking to it.

When you set up a brand and identity and start to broadcast it with your actions, you're setting expectations at a certain level. If you can't meet the expectations you've set for yourself, you're setting yourself up for failure. This is why we said not to be too lofty with your brand messaging — aspiration is one thing, unattainable is another.

If you can't deliver on your company's promises, you'll damage your relationship with your customers. And in today's ever-more connected world, when you make one customer angry, you make all their friends angry too.

Word of mouth reputation is incredibly powerful, especially when it comes to bad news — [a customer who has a positive experience will tell nine other people about it, but an unhappy customer will tell sixteen](#). And for every unhappy customer who speaks up, there are 26 unhappy customers who won't say anything — they'll just leave.

Even if you do everything perfectly, an angry employee or false accusation can create reputational problems that you'll have to deal with — it's not worth the risk of damaging your reputation by bringing it on yourself.

Remember that your relationship with your customers is just that: a relationship. It's a give and take, and customers will start to think of your brand as a person. Everything you do is the face of that person, and you should constantly be striving to enrich that relationship.

## *Some Customer Mentality Tactics to Keep in Mind*

Always reach out. Make an apology, even if you think the customer was being unreasonable. Your pride isn't worth the damage they can do by complaining. And make sure your apology is on brand! If your usual brand voice is casual and fun, don't suddenly switch to legalese when things go wrong – it won't sound genuine and won't have the effect.

A heartfelt apology can go a long way – 37% of customers reported being satisfied with their service when they were offered some form of monetary compensation, but when that compensation had an apology on top of it, [that number jumped to 74%](#).

Make sure to train your staff on your brand identity as well. That doesn't mean they have to use scripted lines all the time, but the way each individual staff member interacts with your customers should be reflective of the brand identity as a whole.

And if you sell products, consider adding little personal touches like a thank you note or samples of related products. Zinus, a maker of beds and mattresses, includes blank thank you and greeting cards in their shipments so you can thank the person who gave you the product. Even if your customer doesn't personally take advantage of them, they'll appreciate the gesture.

## *Some Final Thoughts On Branding*

Branding can be a tricky business – it's hard to nail down who you are, what you sound like, and what you stand for – but it's important.

Human beings like to put a face on things. We ascribe personalities and attitudes even to things that don't actually have them, like the companies we buy from. Having a clear brand identity is the difference between an unremarkable, forgettable business transaction and the forging of a new relationship between a customer and a company.

That relationship and how it's perceived will depend on who the customer thinks you are, and the image you put into the world is up to you.