

Brand image: *How to make that unforgettable mark*

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Understanding “Brand Image”

Every new business will have a brand image. Every existing business already has one. But what is “brand image?” First of all it is power. It is real power that you cannot afford to NOT understand. In the hands of a leader, a brand image can inspire a company in the same way a great president can inspire a nation. A brand image should convey the essence, character and purpose of a company, and its products and services. It is the heart and soul of a business from which all outward expressions emanate.

Impact of “Brand Image”

A strong brand image will enrich your bottom line and boost your business’s value, as well as influence consumer preference. The logic behind the impact of branding is simple: if consumers are more familiar with your business “brand image”, they are more likely to feel more favorable toward you and to purchase your products. This will have a positive impact on sales, earnings and cash flow.

Defining “Brand Image”

If your business brand has not been planned and is not strategically focused, it is what we call an accidental brand. In order for your business’s brand image to be effective, it has to be defined, directed and understood by all audiences. Your business brand should distinguish you from your competitors. It is the promise that your company makes to your customers, employees, business partners, and vendors.

Creating “Brand Image”

Creating a brand image for your small business is a process—one that is planned, strategically focused, and integrated throughout the company. Branding establishes the direction, leadership, clarity of purpose, inspiration and energy creating a valuable business asset. The branding process affects all forms of communications, from your logo or visual identity to advertising to public relations to product packaging. It is the intentional declaration of who you are, what you believe, and why your customers should put their faith in you and your products.

The first step—WHO

Begin by asking several questions: Who are you now? What really does the company represent? Where is it going? Does it have a set of objectives? Are there long range plans for its growth? How realistic are the long-range objectives? If you achieve your goals, what do you see emerging as the dominant personality traits of the company? Are you happy with these? How do I want consumers to view the business? Who are my customers and employees, and how does my business, product or service address their needs? Who are my competitors and why is my business better? If you can unearth them you may find the objectives interesting. If you have been in business for a while, you may even find that your goals are out of date. But that’s okay because the philosophical and judgmental exercise involved in updating it will be healthy. Overconfidence spells obsolescence in these days of volatile public moods.

The second step—WHAT

Next, ask questions about your present business image. Remember that you cannot change, improve or otherwise alter an unknown quality if you do not know what it is you are trying to change. You may be resourceful and objective enough to do this research if your company is strictly a local operation. However, professional assistance should be employed otherwise. If you do decide to hire a professional to conduct this research, be prepared to get some shocks. For example, consider the restaurateur who believes his reputation for good food at reasonable prices is unimpeachable. After the research is conducted he discovers that this is true, but only for older people. The younger ones—under 40—preferred restaurants with more atmosphere.

The third step—WHY

After determining your present business image, it is time to ask yourself “Why do you want to change your image?” And then follow that question with “What image do you want to project?” Any company that worries about its image in the first place generally wishes to be regarded as the best of all companies. Unfortunately, that is the same goal of almost every other company. And that is the rub. Saying “Me, too” will certainly not set your company apart, so try and be a bit more specific, perhaps more candid about your own goals. Recognize that a company cannot be all things to all people. It is as different from the next company as individuals differ; build on this, do not try to gloss it over into a bland facelessness. And, as you wrestle with the riddle of just what sort of personality you would like to see the company reflect, you will give your business philosophy a good screening. This airing may firm up some that were otherwise buried. The net effect is that you will discover what is unique about your company. From this exercise you will determine what is most important and, ultimately, you will be setting the foundation for company goals in the public relations context.

The fourth step—WHERE

Finally, ask yourself where and what must be done to freshen up the company's image. At this point we assume that if any internal changes were called for—structuring within to make the business more efficient, or rejuvenation of products—they have been taken care of. The job now is to begin surgery on the old image, and communicating these changes. It is not purely a question of gearing up for accelerated advertising or publicity campaigning. If the business needs a major facelift, all other elements of the company's dress may have to be changed—the logo, business colors, its letterhead, packaging and everything else that represents the business. One of the best places to start is with the business's visual identity system. A good rule of thumb is to be consistent and remember that hiring a graphic designer to create a professional-looking visual identity program is well worth the money in the long run.

Finally, how to avoid the pitfalls

There are many pitfalls to negotiate in this process of improving the business brand image. First, guard against too much optimism and too much enthusiasm. The brand building process—no matter how much money or creative energy you throw at it—takes time. A company's image cannot be accomplished over night. Second, successful business branding cannot be achieved by far-out advertising or gimmicks. It takes planning and strategy. Third, researching, planning and strategizing are only part of the process to create a business's brand image. Whether or not the business brand is successfully changed depends upon daily company-wide effort to sustain this new attitude. Finally—and especially—remember to include your employees' and customers' perspectives in the rebuilding of your business's brand image. This is the bedrock of a new brand image. Otherwise the whole program will have been built on a house of sand.