

The Birth of a Brand

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Ah, to be a brand. When you buy a car, or a shirt, or a coffee for that matter, why do you make the buying decisions you make? Maybe it's because the product you choose is the least or most expensive. Maybe you decide on the highest quality you can find. Whatever the reason, you've likely heard of the product, the company or the *brand* before. It's also likely that you feel something about the brand that you are buying. Your purchase decisions are based, in part, on the emotions created by a brand. The brand makes you feel a certain way and that's a big part of the consumer experience.

We tend to buy things that make us feel good, smart, fit, fashionable and the like. We spend loads of cash trying to fit and maintain our own image, whether it's the way others see us or the way we see ourselves. When we use the right brand of shampoo or drink the right beer we feel good about ourselves, plain and simple. We feel good because someone along the way told us that we *should* feel good about using that brand.

When we talk about brands, we are talking about much more than consumable goods. Doctors with the best reputation are a brand, in fact so are those with the worst reputation. A fabulous waiter at your favorite restaurant is a brand, do you ask for him by name? A brand is simply a recognizable identity of a product or service. How we feel about brands, and how it gets that way is a bit more complex.

What do you really know about the product you are buying or the company you are buying it from? Where do you get that information? We are bombarded with images and messages hundreds of times a day. Everywhere we look, from a billboard on the highway to the glossy pages of fashion magazines, brands are everywhere. What we know about them is decided upon by the executives who tell us what to think about their brand by the manner in which they choose to tell us their story. What is your brand's story? Is it clearly defined? Do you tell it often?

The way that large companies with huge advertising and marketing budgets tell us about their brands is through repetition. Lots and lots of repetition. If you'd only ever seen the logo for Coca Cola once in your life, you likely wouldn't have much recollection of what it was or what it was supposed to mean to you. As it stands, we have all been looking at that red and white logo since we were very small children. All around the world, Coca Cola is a brand that means one thing to everyone. Canned or bottled cola beverage. Sweet, carbonated, inexpensive, Coca Cola.

Consistency is the other piece of the formula that is integral in ensuring that people will remember your brand. If your favorite restaurant changed name, logo and menu, would you recognize it as your favorite restaurant? Not likely. Companies spend huge amounts of money determining their logo, their look and their story. These things must remain consistent if they are to be remembered by consumers. Are you consistent in the story you are telling about your brand?

In the service industry, the products you are marketing are often intangible. A haircut, a pedicure or a spa treatment are products that happen to us as we purchase them. They don't have a logo stuck on them and it's harder to make that brand stick in people's minds. Yet, there is a huge amount of loyalty to the salons and spas that we love. You are marketing an experience. Your customers will come to expect a consistent type of experience. From the music you play and the way your treatment room smells to the way you answer the phone. These are all part of your brand. Set standards and stick to them, it will help you define your business and your brand.

When branding your business, obviously your business name is extremely important to the message and to its ability to be effectively branded. If you were a high-end salon in a high-end part of town with a high-end clientele, I'd venture to say *Cheap Cuts* would be a very ineffective name for your business. Likewise businesses whose name, or brand, seem too high-end for their

market or client base may send a negative message to someone looking for a less expensive stylist. A strong name that means something is one of the best weapons you can have in the battle of the brands. Choose your weapon wisely.

Okay, so what does all this mean to you and your business? Let's talk about how you can ensure that your business can become a stronger brand that stands out to new and existing customers as something they want to be a part of. It's important to realize that your brand, your story, won't suit everyone. You shouldn't expect it to, nor should you want it to, it's too difficult to try to be all things to all people, eventually it will fail you.

Determine what your personal story is and then build your brand around it, and stick with it. Don't lose sight of who you are and what you are trying to be to your customers.

Next, be sure to tell your story, and tell it often. Knowing that you have a story does you no good if you haven't told it to anyone. First start by being sure that your staff all know your story, the message you want your brand to be about. Then shout it loud and clear, in the way your business looks, in the energy and attitude of yourself and your team, in the consistency of the quality of your work, and in print. Put your logo, and thus your story in print, and make sure it's the same everywhere you put it. Use consistent fonts and colors across the board. Use them on your website, on your business cards, on your letterhead, on your front door. Put it in clear view of potential new customers. Create curiosity about your and your brand.

So as you begin to focus on creating a stronger brand ask yourself the following questions - How am I telling my story? Is my story consistent with how I want my brand to be perceived? Are my brand and logo recognizable and consistent? Does our team know what our brand means and are they telling the story? And the all important, if I wasn't a part of the brand already, would I want to be? If the answer to the last question is *no*, you have some rethinking to do. If it's *yes*, you're well on your way, maybe even to being the next *Coca Cola*.