



BRANDING

Do Small Businesses Need a Strong Brand Identity?

If we consider marketing is actively promoting a product or service. It's a push tactic. It's pushing out a message to get sales results: "Buy our product or use our service because it's better than theirs." This is oversimplification, but that's it in a nutshell. This is **not** branding.

Branding on the other hand should both precede and underlie any marketing effort. Branding is not push function, it's a pull function. Branding is the expression of the essential truth or value of an organisation, product, or service. It identifies who you are. It is a combination of character, values, and attributes that clarify what this particular brand is and is not. A good brand **will** encourage someone to buy a product, and it directly supports whatever sales or marketing activities are in play, but the brand does not explicitly say "**buy me.**" Instead, it says "**This is what and who I am. This is why I exist.**"

Marketing may contribute to a brand, but the brand is bigger than any particular marketing effort. The brand is what remains after the marketing has swept through the room. It's what sticks in your mind associated with a product, service, or organisation—whether or not, at that particular moment, you bought or did not buy.

The brand is ultimately what determines if you will become a loyal customer or not. The marketing may convince you to buy a particular Toyota, and maybe it's the first foreign car you ever owned, but it is the brand that will determine if you will only buy Toyotas for the rest of your life.



Your brand is built from many things, not the least of these is the customer experience, the better the experience the more value there is in your brand. Look at the All Blacks, the better they perform, the more people watch. They buy more merchandise and the brand value goes through the roof. Make sure you give your clients a positive experience, it will pay dividends.

Many small businesses feel that having a brand is not something necessary to successfully market their products or services. Some think it is something only large companies need. And although some might invest in a logo, they miss the fact that a brand identity is so much more than just the visual impression of your business. Even if you don't have a logo, your business still has a brand.

Branding is about the impression you make, what is special about your business and how you connect with your target audience. It encompasses your company name, what customers say about your business when asked and what it is like to do business with you.

However, few small businesses really understand what brand identity is and why it is important to their overall marketing strategy. There are many benefits of a strong brand identity and small businesses should take advantage of building one that creates visibility and trust, especially when trying to attract new customers via online marketing activities.



What is a brand identity?

Your brand is the perception the world has of your business and communicates your personality and values. It also highly influences your prospects' opinion of who you are and whether they want to do business with you. A brand:

- Is everything you are, the value you deliver and the total client experience. Every image you project needs to consistently reflect the personality of your business.
- Reflects your business's promise, message and values. Your identity should be consistent with, and reinforce, your purpose and your core message to your customers.
- Conveys the expectations and promises that you extend to your clients in terms of quality, service, reliability and trustworthiness, shaping their perception of you and your business.

- Helps the audience differentiate you from your competitors, positively influencing their decision to hire you.

A good brand communicates clearly, artistically and creates credibility. It enables you to provide customers with an image that can evoke feelings about your business, having a powerful impact on whether someone wants to do business with you.

- When someone looks at your business card, website or marketing piece, what does your image project?
- Does this image reflect your business's personality and values?
- Is it consistent across every aspect of your company – from your materials, to your attitudes, to the way you answer the phone, to the way you conduct yourself in public?



How do you determine your brand identity?

If you have never thought about your brand and just let it happen, it would be beneficial to take some time to determine what your brand projects and whether it is consistent with your values. Ask customers the first words or images that come to their mind when your business is mentioned.

- If they consistently respond with adjectives that fit your business such as reliable, committed to excellence or delivers quality on time and within budget, then your brand has been developed and you can now take it to the next level.
- When responses are inconsistent, ambiguous, or refer to attributes such as cost, it is an indicator of a weak brand image.

If you have a weak brand, determine what it should be and focus on marketing efforts that help build awareness around your brand.

Remember that your brand is developed through **an entire customer experience** and needs to be reinforced consistently through your Web site, social media profiles, sales tools, promotional items, customer service, messages and other aspects of doing business with you.



Evolving your brand

If you have developed a good brand, it should continue to evolve with your business. As your business matures, so should your brand. Keeping it fresh helps your business continue to be relevant to your customers.

Evolving your brand does not mean changing your brand but rather refreshing, updating, or clarifying the image of yourself so it aligns with your mission and values as a company. If you have had the same logo for several years, talk with a designer to see if you can update its look without changing the overall image it projects.

If your brand is weak, work on strengthening it. Review your web presence and work to build a strong online presence to drive more qualified traffic to your business.

- **Update your social media profiles.** Consistency of the brand across all platforms builds credibility and trust. Inconsistent profiles, messages and

images leads to confusion and weakens your brand.

- **Obtain social proof.** Encourage online reviews from happy customers to help project the quality and value you deliver. No reviews or testimonials raises questions about your ability to deliver.
- **Engage with your target customer through content.** Customers are researching solutions long before contacting vendors. Providing highly-informative content will increase the expertise associated with your brand.

Small businesses are under the microscope due to all the exposure that can be easily achieved by effective online marketing. Build a strong brand identity by ensuring you always under promise and over deliver. Then you can achieve those positive reviews that can propel your business to enormous success.