



## BRANDING CURES SEVERAL MARKETING HEADACHES

Are you trying to attract business with a no-name, no-differences-from-competitors company identity? Branding your company, when done well, not only helps you stand out in a field of similar choices, it also helps you avoid price-shoppers and deliver results to customers that inspire loyalty. Here's why.

Headache #1: Competitors all seem the same

Put yourself in the mindset of a customer and go shopping for a company that provides what you sell. Do all the options seem pretty much the same? If so, create a memorable difference with branding. Stand for something that will set you apart.

Be faster, longer-lasting, more traditional, more fashionable, more child-friendly, organic, more international, etc. When you put this difference front and center in your company name and tag line, you become the best and possibly even the only choice for your target market.

Some companies make their mission statements available to customers as a way to communicate their operating values. Others embody their values and differentiation in advertising symbols, slogans, signage and store design. Still others rely on media coverage to get across their distinctive message. Some convey what they stand for in their customer newsletter. Standing for something specific (not something vague like "quality") helps your company say "So what?" to all the competition.

Another way to brand the company is to choose a personality for it and embody that personality in everything they do. Here are some options:

- sincere and friendly
- off-beat, fun to be with or exciting
- adventurous or artistic
- careful and finicky
- glamorous and sophisticated
- the strong, silent type
- brash and even slightly irritating
- motherly and considerate

From the company's personality can flow ad campaigns, kinds of special events to sponsor, company colors and typefaces, corporate gift selection, even the talent chosen to record company voice mail messages. With a personality, you're more memorable than bland competitors.

Headache #2: Price-shoppers and tire-kickers waste your time

When you make pricing part of your branding, you cut down on the number of "tire-kickers" you need to deal with. This occurs whether your prices are high, low or medium. You also rope in many of the shoppers who might otherwise make incorrect assumptions. Some go away without asking your prices because they figure they couldn't afford you. Some guess that your prices are low and conclude that therefore you couldn't be very good at what you do. In the latter case, proclaiming your high prices increases business because clients willing to pay for the best now know you fall into the category of elite firms they want to patronize.

Above all, make sure your pricing fits with the other components of your image. If you charge in the low range, your stationery, logo and delivery trucks shouldn't look classy and expensive. If you charge in the high range, you should be giving out higher quality company gifts and promotional items.

Another good solution for companies bothered by price shoppers and customers seemingly without brand loyalty is to lean more heavily on benefits differentiating them from competitors. The classic definition of business benefits reminds us that people don't really buy 3/4-inch drills, they buy 3/4-inch holes. They don't buy an item or a service, but the result produced by the item or the service.

If you're a financial planner, you really deliver not financial advice but peace of mind and the ability to live well in the future or take care of one's family. If you're a rental car agency, you really deliver not a rental car but the ability to drive around freely when someone's own car is being repaired or is far away back home. Building these benefits into your company name and tag line is smart.

Headache #3: Customer service doesn't inspire loyalty

Branding can give your organization an image to live up to and therefore help your employees perform better than with a bland identity. This worked so well for Domino's Pizza when their identity rested on delivery within 30 minutes that they had to pull back on this promise after a jury held the company responsible for an accident caused by a driver rushing to deliver within the promised time. To avoid that pitfall, run your new proposed branding past a lawyer trained to think in terms of worst case scenarios.

Keep tabs on how well your employees are living up to a customer service promise by engaging a "mystery shopper" or "mystery patient" (for hospitals), who interacts with the company incognito and then files a report on their experience. Many of the faults that turn up in such reports can be easily corrected once identified, leading to an improved image.

You can also directly solicit feedback from clients through a survey form. Sometimes the very act of asking for feedback improves your firm's image, since it shows you care about customers' experiences.

When implemented intelligently and visibly, branding sets you apart from competitors, helps free you of price shoppers and gives customers an experience that brings them back to you again and again.