

Branding Your Business: Brainstorming

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Your brand is everything. It's logos and fonts and colors and content. It's customer experience and execution (and sometimes missed execution). It's what you say and what you don't. What you do and what you don't. It's the intersection between how you present yourself and how others perceive you. And, contrary to what loving adults told you as a child, in the world of branding it does matter how others view you. But the beauty of that is it's always within your power to change perception with the choices you make.

If you want brand power, there are many things to consider. The important thing is that you ask yourself the right questions from the outset. Here's where you should begin:

What's the problem you solve? People aren't shopping for things or services. They're shopping for solutions to their problems. How do you (or how are you planning to) remedy their pain point?

Who's competing in your space? Know your competition. What are they doing? How well (or poorly) are they doing it?

What differentiates you? How are you different from your competitors? What makes you unique? Is it what you sell or how you do business? How can you distinguish yourself from others in the same or similar space?

What's your story? Why are you in business? Why do you care about what you're doing? What brought you here? (This is a great point in your brainstorming process to establish your credibility. Perhaps you have education in this field? Or you too suffered from a pain point and found a remedy that would benefit others?)

What values do you and your company emulate? Know what you stand for (and what you won't). Do you value transparency? Quality? Customer service? Think about what's most important to you and ask yourself if that quality is apparent in your branding.

Who is your ideal customer? Are you interested in selling to left-handed females between the ages of 18 and 19? Great! Know that market and rock it! But don't stop there. Think about who isn't likely to buy and why not. What would it take to make them an ideal customer? That's not to say that everyone should be a customer. But clarity about who might be interested (or not) and why (or why not) can be useful in targeting your messaging appropriately.

What would a happy customer say about you and your company? Happy customers don't just buy your products or services—they promote them. So how are they advertising your business?

What would an unhappy customer say about you and your company? Complaints shouldn't be nuisances to you; they're opportunities to do better. If a customer's perception of your company is inconsistent with how you wish to be viewed, look honestly at where and how (and if) your brand is missing the mark.

What's your personal/company "voice"? Are you sassy? Business-like? Academic? Casual? If your website and/or marketing collateral could speak (and it's supposed to), what would it sound like? And does it sound the same across different mediums? Consistency in tone is part of establishing your brand.

Don't box yourself in. Let your purpose and mission be big enough for you to grow. Don't look to be known as the maker of that specific knickknack, which may or may not be obsolete in a few years' time. Be the progressive developer of new and innovative knickknacks and leave yourself room to grow your business interests.

BUT don't be the maker of all the things, either. There's a sweet spot you need to find. If you've taken the time to answer (or give thought to) the above questions, you'll have a better feel for where that balance can be achieved.

A warning (or strong suggestion)... Don't make the mistake of spending time and money on logos and graphic design if you don't yet know who you are or what your business will be. Figure out who you are and what you do as a business first and then let the aesthetics follow. All of the beautiful logos and flashy special effects in the world are just fluff if there's no substance behind them.

If nothing else, remember that authenticity is everything. Be authentically you. Be trustworthy. Be passionate about the work you do. And share that in the stories you tell and the messages you share about your business. Because people may buy stuff, but they support people. Be a person whom others would want to give their business (and their hard-earned dollars) to.

Keep this in mind: There is no "done" in branding. It is an ever-shifting and evolving proposition. You will change. The market will change. Your competitors will change. Change of all kinds is inevitable. Trends and time will mean that what works today may not work tomorrow and that what would have been an awful idea last year may just be ready to yield results now.

Your job isn't to finish branding—it's to stay dialed in to what's working and what's not, to who cares and why. So be flexible. Adjust and adapt. Rinse and repeat.

