Is Your Business A Brand?

In this third business column of a series which focuses on small business marketing I ask CEOs a pointed question that highlights an important aspect of the marketing strategy. I began this series by suggesting that marketing is vital to your small business success and then followed up with suggestions for building an impactful marketing strategy. In this segment, I ask a key question, the answer to which will help guide the total marketing effort.

Is your business a brand? You may not think so, but the answer to that question is “Yes.” Even if your business is a small, one- or two-person operation, you should consider your business a brand.

The word brand itself can be confusing, because people tend to associate it with very large businesses. When someone asks you your favorite brand of soda, you’re most likely to think of huge companies like Pepsi or Coke. When you hear the phrase “brand name clothing,” names like Levi’s, Nike or Calvin Klein may come to mind.

Basically, a brand is a mark, logo or symbol that distinguishes your business from others, but it really goes beyond that. Your brand is what people think about when they hear your business’s name. It’s the centerpiece of all your marketing efforts.

In that sense, your brand goes well beyond a logo or tagline. Everything about your business — your color scheme, your website, your business philosophy, your office, your culture, your communication style — contributes to defining your brand.

When you think of your business as a brand, you can begin to shape how people perceive it.

So, let’s start by asking, how strong is your brand? Small business owners are often so busy taking care of customers that they forget to assess their brand identity. It’s important to do so, however, to get an idea of how both current and potential customers perceive your business.

A good way to assess your brand may be to ask yourself a series of questions and answer them as honestly as possible:

- Do people know my business’s name and what we do?
- What do people think about my business’s name?
- What would I like them to think?
Do my business’s name and my logo project a strong representation of what I offer?

Whom do I want to communicate with, and where can I reach them?

What could I do to improve the perception of my brand?

If some aspects could use improvement, take some time to tweak and cultivate your brand identity.

For example, recently, I asked a small business CEO this question. How important is your logo for your small business? This caused a silence in the conversation because, like many CEOs, they usually do not really think about that question. I was reminded of this marketing fact by Ashley Kimlinger, Director of Enterprise Brand Management, Deluxe Corp. She wrote, “Some may think they’re ‘too small’ to warrant a professional logo. Others may think it’s an expense they can spare — that it isn’t important. But in thinking this way, you are doing your business a disservice from the outset. A logo is one of the most important elements you can have in marketing your business.”

So, I suggest in this topic of marketing that your logo is your brand’s cornerstone. When you assess your brand, your logo is one of the first things to consider. For new businesses, this may mean creating a logo from scratch. For businesses looking to rebrand or freshen up their image, a new logo may be in order.

Logos are a vital element of brand identity for businesses of all types and sizes. Whether it’s for a very small business with just a handful of employees, or one that’s growing to 100 employees or more, a professionally designed logo evokes a sense of reliability and competence that potential customers appreciate.

Logos are important for several reasons. Here are a few starters:

1. A strong logo helps you make a good first impression (more on this below).
2. Your logo helps convey your business’s values and personality.
3. A logo provides credibility and helps build trust with customers.
4. When used consistently, a logo reinforces your brand in customers’ minds and creates familiarity over time so they’ll remember you when they need you.

No matter the industry, the most successful brands tend to share at least one common trait: a very recognizable logo. If it’s computers and software, Apple and Microsoft both jump out. For cars, the likes of Chevrolet, Ford, Mercedes and BMW all have very familiar logos. You can probably picture every one of these logos in your mind without much effort, and that familiarity helps you relate to the business beyond any one specific product.
Logos make the right first impression. For small businesses, a logo is a key component of the first impression they make on potential customers. When prospects are researching providers they may want to do business with, a professional logo creates trust and inspires intrigue.

A strong logo alone doesn’t secure new customers. In the end, your products or services will play the biggest role in a customer’s decision to choose you. That said, an eye-catching, professional logo sparks the necessary interest for a customer to check out what you’re offering in the first place.

Is your logo true to your brand? Your brand is what customers think about any time they see or hear the name of your business. Ideally, your logo will help convey the values and emotions you’d like associated with your brand identity.

When I read and listen to professional marketers that create logos, here are some points that they make to ensure your logo is true to your brand:

- Be authentic. Your logo should reflect your business’s values and personality.
- Stand out. Make sure your logo differentiates you from others in your industry and market.
- Keep it simple and scalable. Create a logo that is legible in even the smallest sizes, and in black and white or full color. Focus on a simple design, using no more than two colors and typography styles.
- Once your business has a logo that’s true to your brand, include it in all your marketing materials

How big or small should your logo be? In a perfect world, your logo will be recognizable no matter what size it is, from a tiny social media icon to a huge billboard.

Scalability can be about more than just size, however. Ideally, the logo you choose will be equally effective when seen in black and white as it is in full color. This is particularly helpful if your logo appears in the local newspaper, on invoices and letterhead, or on other materials printed in black and white.

Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when considering logo designs for your business:

- Keep it simple. A logo that contains many fine details may look good at full size, but a simpler design will ensure that it doesn’t look too cluttered when that size is scaled down.
With fonts, less is more. A unique font can be a great feature of memorable logos, but be careful not to go overboard. Utilizing more than two or three fonts in a single logo can make it seem like you’re trying too hard.

Limit your colors: Logos that include more than one or two colors are expensive to print on marketing materials, promotional products, signs and banners and other media. Keep this in mind as you consider how many colors to include in your design.

Make it something you love. In the end, your logo is the first thing many potential customers will see when it comes to your business. No matter what kind of design you choose, be sure that it’s something you are truly fond of that is also true to your brand values.

Put your logo where people will see it. Once your business has a logo that’s true to your brand and makes a strong first impression, it’s time to get it seen! Here’s how to get potential customers to think about the positive aspects of your business each and every time they see your logo:

- Digital media: Your logo should appear on your business website, as well as in any digital advertising your business uses. This includes display, pay-per-click and social media advertising.
- Social media: Your logo should also be very visible on your social media accounts, in most cases serving as your main profile image or icon.
- Mail: If your business sends products or correspondence to customers by mail, consider custom envelopes, letterhead, postcards and boxes that include your logo.
- Product packaging: If the core of your business is selling products to consumers, including your logo on product packaging and shipping materials is a no-brainer.
- Promotional products: Many businesses use promotional products to spread awareness of their brand even further. You can place your logo on just about any promotional item, from T-shirts and hats to pens and umbrellas.
- Vehicles: Consider branding the vehicles you use to transport products, make service calls or visit events. Every fellow commuter is another opportunity for a brand impression.
- Custom apparel: Does your business have raving fans who would purchase a shirt, hat or other wearable emblazoned with your logo? Consider investing in high-quality custom apparel that you can sell for another source of revenue.
Business listing websites: Don’t forget to upload your logo to business listing websites like Yelp, TripAdvisor and Google My Business.

TV: If your business has the budget for TV advertising, including your logo is a must. After all, TV is first and foremost a visual medium, so consider a large logo for a few seconds at the end of your ad, or a constant watermark version in the corner of the screen throughout the commercial.

How much should professional logo design cost? Try to stay within your price range and pay a price that makes you comfortable, while still ensuring the final design is one you’ll be proud to display.

Reasonable designs may start at $100 to $200. Expect a simple, professionally designed logo in this price range. “Simple” typically means a logo with a well-defined company name and symbol. Intricate patterns and complex lettering may increase the price tag. The finished design should be clear, unique and professional.

A more complex design may warrant $400 or higher. A logo design with intricate patterns and fonts typically costs twice as much as a simple design. Expect to pay a minimum of $400. The price increase usually includes extra services, such as up to 10 original logo designs to choose from, and unlimited revisions.

In the end, the price should be fair and equal to the time spent on the task. When selecting a designer or logo design company, look for guarantees, samples of previous work and positive reviews. Find a designer who is willing to hear about your unique business, whether it’s via an initial phone conversation or by requesting you fill out a short creative brief. Be sure the designer cares about what sets your business apart. That knowledge will reflect in the finished design.

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