

Your Brand Is Much More Than Your Logo

By Eileen Monesson

ENTREPRENEUR magazine defines branding as:

The marketing practice of creating a name, symbol, or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products. Simply put, your brand is your promise to your client. It tells them what they can expect from your products and services, and it distinguishes your offering from that of your competitors. Your brand is derived from who you are, who you want to be, and who people perceive you to be.

So, the definition of branding should be extended to include: It is the process of aligning who you say you are with the market's perception of who you are.

Your logo is not your brand. It is a symbol that represents your brand. Logos are meant to make a target audience instantly think of your firm. A true brand is the promise of an experience you communicate to a specific market. It is the emotional connection that you have with your clients, prospects, and center of influences, as well as the audiences they influence.

Concept of branding

Branding helps a firm, and an individual, cultivate its reputation by delivering on its brand promise. To develop a successful brand, you must have a clear understanding of the emotional and functional needs of your target market. Does a prospect engage your firm because it wants to do business with a firm that has extensive knowledge of its industry or because the firm has a strong reputation for providing a high level of partner interaction on every engagement? It makes a difference in the message that will be communicated. When you develop a brand based on your firm's values, principles, and audience needs, your marketing, and its execution, becomes clear and genuine.

Although the foundation of your brand may be your logo, message, and collateral, a meaningful

and authentic brand is contingent on the experiences that your clients have each time they interact with your firm. In a service organization, it is more important to deliver a consistent level of exceptional service than it is to convey that message in your tagline or mission statement. If a firm claims that it is responsive to its clients' needs and its partners are not accessible or do not answer inquiries in a timely fashion, then clients will see that the firm is not delivering on its brand promise.

"Brand integrity is the ultimate business and management strategy," claims Gregg Lederman, founder of Brand Integrity, Inc. and author of *ACHIEVE BRAND INTEGRITY*. He states:

Brand integrity aligns who a company is (core values, mission/vision, and strategic benefits) with where it is going (goals and strategic plans) and how employees will deliver the behaviors and experiences to achieve the desired results. The four realities of branding are:

1. The brand is not part of the business, it is the business.
2. A brand is about experiences, not logos or taglines.
3. The little things a company does consistently are much more important than the big things that it says.
4. A well-executed brand strategy is the single most important differentiator between a good company and a great company.

Living the brand: The Ritz-Carlton and Starbucks

Great companies, such as the Ritz-Carlton and Starbucks, train employees on what they have to do to *live the brand* and hold them accountable. All new employees of the Ritz-Carlton are required to spend the first two weeks performing on-the-job training. They are taught how to deliver on the Ritz-Carlton brand promise, not their individual job responsibilities. Management at the Ritz-Carlton wants to make sure that every employee, regardless if they work at the front desk or in the laundry room, knows what is expected of them and how to deliver the Ritz-Carlton ex-

perience. Its motto, “Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen,” says a lot about how employees are expected to behave and how they are treated.

The Ritz-Carlton invests in its brand in a number of ways that are noteworthy. The start of each shift begins with the “huddle.” Employees meet to discuss great brand or “wow” experiences, as well as the ones that were not so remarkable every day at every property worldwide. The huddle is meant to share ideas, recognize outstanding employees, and overcome potential barriers to delivering on the Ritz-Carlton brand promise. Employees are encouraged and expected to share their experiences with others at every level within the organization. Ritz-Carlton managers reinforce one of its 12 service values to employees during each meeting.

In addition, all employees are empowered to give guests an exceptional experience, without going through a lot of corporate bureaucracy. Every “lady and gentleman” employee is given \$2,000 to use at his or her discretion to ensure that a guest has an exceptional experience. Upon learning that a guest was pregnant and could not drink the champagne her husband ordered, a waiter sent for a non-alcoholic substitute. After witnessing a woman purchasing cough medicine at the lobby store, a maid delivered homemade chicken soup to that guest. When the “ladies and gentlemen” at another Ritz-Carlton learned that a dying young lady’s only regret was that she would not live long enough to attend her prom, they had one for her.

In his book, *The New Gold Standard: 5 Leadership Principles for Creating a Legendary Customer Experience* Courtesy of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Joseph A. Michelli states:

[T]hrough dedicated adherence to the five leadership principles of the Ritz-Carlton, everyone can elevate his or her business to its gold standard. The New Gold Standard reflects both intuitive and counterintuitive aspects of leadership, which may be fairly easy to comprehend, yet far more difficult to master.

It is Michelli’s belief that constant and steadfast focus on these Ritz-Carlton principles will result in your developing and maintaining *The New Gold Standard* for your industry. Specifically, the principles are:

1. Define and refine.
2. Empower through trust.
3. It’s not about you.
4. Deliver wow!
5. Leave a lasting footprint.

The Starbucks brand promise is simple, yet effective: *Deliver the best coffee, provide friendly service, and make*

customers feel that they’re in their “third place.” This place is neither home, nor work, but a place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Where Starbucks’ leadership took an ordinary product such as coffee and significantly added value by staging it in an environment of affordable luxury, the Ritz-Carlton elevated the luxury experience to a true art form through its branding.

If delivering on the brand promise is so important, why do firms spend more time and money on advertising that they provide exceptional service than actually delivering that service? Generally, marketers focus more on the creative brand than the cultural or organizational brand even though both are important. No matter how creative your company’s marketing is, it will not be successful unless employees are focused on delivering on the brand promise made in promotional messages. The key is to position, define, and communicate—through actions and words—how your firm is actually different from the competition.

Brand positioning

Brand positioning is based on the unique selling proposition or competitive advantage that you have in the market. It influences your target audience to engage your firm over another. To be effective, your brand position must be true, differentiating, memorable, and compelling. Strong brands start with a well-defined positioning statement that communicates the value you can deliver to a targeted audience, as well as how you are distinctive. When developing your positioning statement define:

- your target audience(s);
- key problems your services solve;
- what separates you from the competition;
- unique benefits your clients realize from doing business with you; and
- reasons why your targeted audience believes that you can deliver.

Although most firms think that they offer something unique, hardly any clearly communicate what really distinguishes them in the market. A close look at accounting firm websites will show that most firms use *service* as a positioning strategy. Service is not a unique selling position, although the way that you deliver that service could be.

While clients expect a high-level of service, few firms take the time to define what that really means. Furthermore, management does not communicate to employees what they need to do to deliver consistent exceptional service, which results in a gap. Clients have an image of your firm that may not be the same as the vision that

you have. A survey of customers from approximately 400 companies reported that only eight percent of the companies actually delivered a superior experience, while 80 percent of the companies believed that the service they provided was indeed superior [Bain & Company].

Developing an accounting firm brand

When developing a cultural brand for a New Jersey-based accounting firm, six brand concepts or values that the firm wanted to be known for were identified. Each brand concept was characterized by closely held beliefs and meaningful benefits that aligned with the needs of its clients, team members, and other constituents. Providing “value beyond accounting” was important to the firm. Although this statement is not unique to the firm, the way that it defined “value beyond accounting” and how it would deliver on this brand promise was unique.

The firm believed that value beyond accounting included:

- ongoing client collaboration;
- providing more than accounting; and
- proactively helping its clients succeed.

It developed a list of on-brand behaviors for the staff. This included everything from providing clients with industry data and benchmarks to holding regularly scheduled consulting meetings to discussing strategies to increase profitability. In addition, the firm defined off-brand behaviors, such as offering clients expertise in areas in which they were not strong and missing deadlines. Finally, it decided on behaviors that employees needed to start incorporating into the services provided, including active listening, using open-ended questions, sending clients updates on items of interest, and offering new product lines based on client needs.

In addition, the firm trained its employees on how to deliver “value beyond accounting” and made them accountable for living this brand concept. On- and off-brand behaviors were incorporated into annual performance evaluations and a brand recognition program was instituted. As a result, everyone at the firm knew what was expected and how to deliver on the firm’s brand promise. The gap between the

promises that the marketing department was communicating was closed, and its message became authentic.

Benefits of branding

The benefits of branding go beyond positive interactions with clients, prospects, and referral sources. Firms should invest in branding because:

- Clients will refer more business to you if they know and trust your brand.
- You will attract more business opportunities.
- It will give you a competitive edge.
- A strong brand will reduce the perceived risk of engaging your firm.
- You can build your reputation as a thought leader through branding.

Firms today have to focus on the message and distribution mechanism, which includes employee interactions with clients both in-person and online. The emergence of social media channels, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has changed the game. Firms now need to integrate the experience they want clients to have across all media channels. This involves carefully crafting a message, as well as monitoring its delivery. Because the Internet is interactive, anyone, even a trusted employee, can post both good and bad comments on their experience with your firm.

Although Internet marketing and social media are essential in building brand recognition, firms need to clearly convey their message on-line to all media channels. Creative messaging needs to be consistent across the board in print, radio, and television. If you truly want to stand out from your competition, clients need to experience your value proposition every time they interact with your firm.

About the author: Eileen Monesson is a founding Principal of PRCounts, llc. Her firm is dedicated to helping its clients use the power of public relations and compelling marketing to drive their personal, organizational, and corporate brand. She can be contacted at 609-570-2150 or emonesson@PRCounts.com. ✦

This article is reprinted with the publisher’s permission from the CPA PRACTICE MANAGEMENT FORUM, a monthly journal published by CCH, a Wolters Kluwer business. Copying or distribution without the publisher’s permission is prohibited. To subscribe to the CPA PRACTICE MANAGEMENT FORUM or other CCH Journals please call 800-449-8114 or visit www.tax.cchgroup.com. All views expressed in the articles and columns are those of the author and not necessarily those of CCH or any other person.