



## Brand Relationships

The term *branding* is widely used. It is also increasingly misused and misunderstood. Let's examine the ways that external and internal audiences become familiar with and identify with a brand, as expressed through a company or product.

## The Visual Brand

Does your organization have a brand identity? While many say an emphatic "yes", it is apparent that many organizations lack branding standards and strategies.

The **visual brand** is the "look and feel". We see it represented on advertisements, in print, and online. It all begins with a name and logo. From that, you have a color palette, fonts, a tag line, and selected phrases that express the company's value proposition.

Unfortunately, individual compliance with brand standards doesn't ensure that it is systematic throughout an organization. The strength of a brand's identity largely depends on the public's consistent and frequent exposure to these visuals starting with their usage and exposure for key audiences: shareholders, customers and employee populations.

*At the end of the day, the key to establishing and maintaining a strong brand is that wherever in the world one travels or hears of it, its reference is unmistakably linked to the same corporate identity.*

This is a particularly challenging issue for multi-site organizations with retail locations or field offices and multinational companies that are operating affiliates and offices around the world. It is especially tricky when company's acquire remote locations or sell franchises.

Those that obligate all entities affiliated with them to observe brand policies (i.e. name, logo, positioning, etc.) have a much greater chance of developing a clear and effective brand identity. Those without consistent implementation often remain fragmented and do not establish a uniform global brand. This can result in customer or employee confusion, questions about professionalism and soft brand loyalty.

## The Emotional Brand

All brands elicit certain attitudes towards a company, its products and its people. We decide to associate with or avoid an organization or product based on impressions, often formed in seconds. Customers decide if a product or service is desirable for "someone like me". Brands appeal to **our emotions** through words, design (images & color) and attributes. The notion of brand loyalty is fundamentally about a customer having a relationship with a brand. They depend on it, have expectations of it, and it fills a need – or a perceived one.

A brand can express warmth, seriousness, excitement or trust – each leading to an emotional reaction to purchase or choose an alternative to your products and services. While considered the "soft" side of business, the importance of a customer's connection to a brand cannot be overstated.

There is a push and pull to establishing and reinforcing the emotional brand. First the company must decide what type of customers it is targeting. A high priority should be those with interest in their products and services who provide the greatest profit potential. Then, the company must research the psychographics: attitudes, behaviors, consumption habits, etc. to devise an emotionally appealing brand strategy. Market research, in addition to sales data, is essential to test our assumptions and ensure the link between brand concept and actual emotional appeal to distinct target consumers.

Then, all company representatives must be trained and provided with timely and consistent information to enable them to effectively communicate the brand.

## The Experiential Brand

"How esoteric", you might say. Experience with a corporate logo. Actually, it is that and much more. Brands are built over time and take nurturing. Unprompted, one might recall a brand by name or even its tag line. The non-visual cues that draw one to a brand begin with your interface with the people, places, materials, and policies that are integrated into that brand's existence.

"**Brand experience**" is an important aspect of securing a brand's market position and customer loyalty. It is about the expectations associated with that brand experience: the value one receives, the ease of use, the alternatives for which it substitutes, the ease of purchase, etc. These factors all contribute to how one functionally and emotionally relates to a brand.

Customer service is one of the most important aspects of the brand experience and is usually under-resourced. Oddly, most companies hire their lowest paying, least trained staff to interface with customers in the most personal ways. Customers interact with the brand through those who sell it to them, service them, and particularly those who respond to their questions and concerns.