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4 Elements of a Winning Brand

When it comes to your image, are you hitting hard or striking out? Cover all your bases with these 4 critical elements of a winning brand.

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What instantly springs to mind when customers hear your company name? If you're uncertain-or even worse, stuck with a less-than-stellar image-it's time to give your brand an overhaul. It's no coincidence that industry leaders in every category from soft drinks to spas toil endlessly to create some of the world's most recognized brands. But it doesn't have to cost millions or take years to put your company's branding efforts on track. Just follow these four guidelines to create a winning brand image.

1. Differentiate your brand. Branding is all about sending a strong and consistent message. Every time a prospect or customer has contact with your company, whether it's by visiting your website or seeing a print ad, he or she has a branding experience. Fine-tuning your brand image is particularly critical if your business is in a highly competitive product or service arena-your brand will separate your company from the pack.

If it's been a while since you performed a competitive analysis, make time to take this important step in realigning your brand. Clip all your competitors' ads, review their PR coverage, research them online, and buy their products and services. Then decide what makes your product or service different. It's this point of differentiation that allows you to create an image that sticks in customers' minds.

2. Promise value. Once you know what separates your product or service from its competitors, you can redefine your brand message so that it resonates with your best prospects. How well do you know and understand them? Researching and creating an accurate portrait of your targeted prospects is essential to focusing your branding efforts. Doing so will help you reach the audience that will be most receptive to the unique qualities of your products and services. Trying to be all things to all people results in a diluted and weak brand, whereas differentiation based on what your unique customers want, need and value most will result in strong branding and sales.

What does your product or service deliver that's valued most by your best customers? If you're unsure, put "listening posts" in place-from online message boards to printed satisfaction surveys-that monitor customers' perceptions of your brand and uncover unmet needs.

3. Be a market leader. Delivering on this value proposition over the long term not only means your company will live up to its branding efforts, but it will also make you a marketplace leader. And performing like a leader means keeping your promises. Today, customers consider the "ownership experience" prior to making many purchases. They look at reviews, read in-depth information and pay attention to word-of-mouth in order to feel confident that the purchase and post-purchase experiences will live up to the expectations raised by brand marketing campaigns. Nothing torpedoes branding efforts faster than failing to live up to marketing claims. To be a true leader in your market niche, focus on improving your customers' experiences and interactions with your company.

4. Integrate your messages. Every interaction a customer has with your brand must be uniform across all marketing channels. How consistently is your brand's message communicated? Do the messages of your various marketing programs conflict? For example, your online marketing-from website content to e-mail solicitations-should be fully integrated with your offline efforts, carrying a single, clear branding message and related design elements throughout.

To ensure your branding tuneup is a success, audit all your company's current marketing communications. Pay particular attention to sales tools, as these tend to become mismatched and disconnected from other marketing efforts over time. Realign them with your company's marketing tools and campaigns to create a stronger brand image.