



# Building Your Brand House

## A PRIMER

by Rachel Downey

Building a Brand can be compared to building a house. You need to know what functions are needed, what style to design in and if (how) the house has value in the market. It is certainly helpful to know what the potential owners (aka customers) are like so you can make sure you appeal to their needs. And it is doubtful that you would begin building without a vision, a good blueprint (plan) and an appropriate budget.

### OVERVIEW

In today's marketplace the terms brand and branding are often thrown around without a full understanding of what they truly mean and encompass for the value of a firm. We all have our favorite "brands" and products that we identify with, however, applying a brand and branding efforts to our own organizations and services can seem like the largest obstacle to overcome in our overall marketing process. We all generally know what we DO, but how do we answer the questions "Who are we?", "What do we stand for?" "What value do we bring?"

### DEFINING BRAND

Brand is a symbolic embodiment of all the information connected to a product, company or place, and serves to create associations and expectations around it. A Brand Identity is not a logo alone, but the

collective look and feel of your organization's communications materials. This often includes a logo, fonts, color schemes, patterns, photo style, symbols and even sound, which may be developed to represent implicit values, ideas and personality.

A Brand Image however, is much broader as it is the collective perception, planned or incidental, of a product, company or place and is the result of every interaction a user has with that product or company or place. This includes interactions with the people, environment, materials, and messages associated with the product, company or place.

The best brands invoke positive emotions or experiences and have adequately aligned perception, reality and organizational goals. This is done through deliberate planning, marketing, and culturing of the desired brand experience. If you don't control the perception, it will

happen to you anyway. If you don't identify your goals, then your brand can't serve you to help you reach them.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST—A BLUEPRINT

Whether you are branding a company, organization, product or place, a good place to start is to identify your business goals. Are you trying to build awareness and recognition, increase market share, expand service offerings or entice more visitors to your place? A solid business plan is the first thing a branding consultant will ask for, as a true brand will help bridge the gap between who you are today—in reality and in perception—and who you want to be tomorrow.

Business plans, strategic plans and marketing plans are all blueprints for how you want to build your organization. Likewise, they serve as a starting point for how your brand should be constructed.

### EXCAVATE YOUR AUTHENTIC PERSONALITY

To figure out who you are isn't always as simple as looking in the mirror. You need to dig down through all the layers of dirt. This means asking your clients - past, present and potential (PPP) - to answer some honest questions about you. It means knowing what your employees say when they are with

colleagues and friends. It means asking top management where they are going - separately - to see if they are going somewhere together or in opposing directions. (If this is the case, which it sometimes is, you may need to go back to the planning stage.)

Knowing how others view you is a good way to determine your approach a new branding effort. It gives you the chance to capitalize on your strengths and compensate for or fix the not-so-good stuff.

#### LAY A FOUNDATION

In this brand-saturated world, it's hard to differentiate yourself with just one thing. If you aren't the first, best, biggest or other "est," you are likely made up of several defining characteristics that work in harmony together. That's the new differentiator - your unique combination. Take these few elements together and mix your own concrete

for laying the foundation of your brand. For instance, some of Studio Graphique's key characteristics are "insightful," "honest" and "visionary." CB2, the hip and less expensive

off-shoot of Crate&Barrel, embraces words like "soulful," "individualistic" and "human" to represent their company and even went so far as to make a pillow that proudly displays their credo. <http://cb2.com/family.aspx?c=462&f=5075>

Use these words to inspire the look and feel of your brand, as well as the messaging and voice (tone and style of writing). Your brand must be an authentic reflection of who you are, be meaningful and valuable and resonate with your audience. Otherwise, it's just pretty pictures.

#### BUILD YOUR BRAND

Once you know who you are and where you're going, you can begin to build upon your foundation. Start with your logo. Ideally, your logo tells a story or has meaning built into it. Can you find or retrofit a story to it? Meaning allows people who interact with your brand to connect and build attachments.

But again, brand identity is not comprised of logo alone. A short tagline goes a long way in explaining either who you are, what you do, who you do it for or how you do it (hint: pick one). Color, textures, image style and other elements also help others "read" what you are all about quickly and make connections with you. Think about how helpful it is when you can glance at a printed piece or website, or see a commercial, and "get it" right away. Oh, so nice!

From here, you can start to flesh out the functional elements. The kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms of your brand house are brochures, websites and other marketing collateral. They serve to communicate your company, products, services or place to your audience and if you're clever, they'll help qualify customers, invite them in and serve coffee.

#### DON'T FORGET YOUR ADVOCATES

The key to the branding process is successful implementation of all of your hard work on both the external and the internal levels. Before going public, it is vital that your entire staff understands your firm's

brand, branding process and brand elements. Every single employee is a representative and advocate for your firm and it is vital that you are all on the same page. A formal unveiling of the brand as an internal office event can be a successful way to get your team excited and will help in preparing you for your formal public launch.

#### MAINTAINING YOUR BRAND HOUSE

Just as you wouldn't build a house and expect it to never need some care, same goes for your brand. Insist on brand standards, the owner's manual for your identity. Then insist everyone follow it to the letter. Periodically after the brand launch, check back with those PPP clients and see if their views have changed. And freshen it up from time to time to match your evolving business plans.

The beauty of brand is that it is, in itself, the foundation for all marketing communications. You can have two different marketing campaigns over two years, or for two different market segments, but they are both still rooted in the core brand essence. Your brand doesn't have to, and in fact, shouldn't change for several years while marketing campaigns can take advantage of varying opportunities without diluting your brand and essence.

Most of all, love it and live it. The more you ARE your brand, the more effective it can be. ■

Color, textures, image style and other elements also help others "read" what you are all about

#### About the Author

Rachel Downey, Principal Design Consultant, Studio Graphique  
[rachel@studiographique.com](mailto:rachel@studiographique.com)



As principal and founder of Studio Graphique, a Branding Consultancy and Environmental Graphic Design firm, Rachel is the resident visionary for the organization and its staff. She has established the philosophy, direction and culture of the firm which is a highly collaborative and creative environment focused on improving life experiences and opportunities for the immediate community and beyond. Rachel holds a BFA in Visual Communication Design from Kent State University and is a graduate of the Cleveland Bridge Builders, a year-long program for aspiring leaders. She has studied at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and is certified in Reiki I. Rachel resides in South Euclid, Ohio with her son Simon, 5, and husband Jason, an architect.