

YOUR BRAND: AS UNIQUE AS YOUR SIGNATURE

Branding. It's the most important word in marketing and promotion these days and--thankfully--has nothing to do with a hot iron. Your "brand" is your calling card. It's who you are and what you do. It's even how you do it. And the relative success with which you market your brand can mean the difference between success and failure, especially if you're a business start-up. The Small Business Administration (SBA) reports that 50-75% of new businesses fail because they haven't established an identity with their customers. In the fiercely competitive world in which we live (and buy), "branding" isn't a fringe activity--it's absolutely fundamental in terms of putting it out there and making it sell.

Successful corporations get this. They spend millions of marketing dollars developing, supporting and maintaining corporate brands. Why? Because branding helps customers identify the products and services they like and induces them to buy. Consider Nordstrom and their reputation for outstanding customer service. This is no accident. It's part of the Nordstrom brand. What about Home Depot's "You can do it, we can help," slogan? Carefully crafted to not only appeal to consumers on a personal level, but consistent with the products and services they offer--it's part and parcel of the Home Depot brand. And branding works.

Reducing the business size without reducing the "brand"

The importance of branding for businesses far smaller than Nordstrom and Home Depot is no less significant. Successful entrepreneurs must also develop and maintain a distinctive brand identity; it's core to their success. And that brand identity often begins with the entrepreneur himself or herself.

"Self-branding" recognizes that a brand runs throughout every aspect of the business, including the person running it. And self-branding is an art form. Peggy M. Parks, Image Consultant for the Parks Image Group, emphasizes, "Carefully studied and mastered, your personal brand can radically propel your business forward or relegate your product to the back shelf, last column...or the final-sale rack."

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Self-branding: an exercise in entrepreneurial self-preservation

Creating a positive “personal” brand identity goes far beyond the quality of your business cards, brochures and Website. It requires the development of a personal image, one that positively enhances and promotes your business. Peggy offers four basic building blocks that--when constructed properly--play a role in the development of one’s personal image:

Visual Impact. What does what you look like say about who you are? Studies at Harvard University show that it takes only 7-20 seconds for someone to make an assessment about your education level, economic status and social standing based solely on the way you look. The implications for entrepreneurs? People often decide to do business with you, based on your visual impact, within those first few seconds of seeing you. It’s critical that your appearance invite business, instead of rejecting it.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communications. The quality and pitch of your voice carry messages about your emotions, fears, enthusiasm and confidence. Like your physical appearance, the way you communicate can turn people on or off. And, in the same way you can alter the way you look, you can also moderate the sound of your voice. Nonverbal communication strategies such as a firm handshake and direct eye contact can enhance your personal brand.

Collateral and Marketing Materials. Your physical appearance may declare “professional,” while your marketing materials scream “amateur.” Part of developing a successful personal brand is ensuring that all the components that make up your business send the same message to customers and clients.

Adherence to Business Protocol. In this era of poor customer service, good manners and a professional demeanor can set your business apart. Consider phone manners. Do you always identify yourself with your first and last name? Do you always ask “Is this a good time to speak?” Phone etiquette is not old-fashioned, it’s good business. Attention to international mores is also critical--errors in international business protocol can be expensive and negatively impact on your overall personal brand.

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Personal Branding 101

Want to invest wisely in your business? Invest wisely in your personal brand. And keep the thread running throughout all the components of your personal brand building, from visual to verbal/non verbal communication, collateral and marketing material and business protocol. Peggy offers five affirmative steps you can take to build your personal brand:

- (1) Always dress appropriately. Impeccable grooming sends an irrefutable message to the world of how you value yourself. You never have a second chance to make a great first impression. And remember that everyone with whom you come into contact is a prospective client.
- (2) Always communicate as if you were auditioning for a movie part. Keep your verbal and nonverbal communications consistent with your personal brand. Walk and talk as if you own the world, and you just might find that you do.
- (3) Strive to be a professional in everything you do. When you walk out the door, zip up your “professional suit.” No matter how you feel or what curveballs life has thrown that day, show the world that you’ve got it all together.
- (4) Pick up an etiquette book. You may be surprised at what’s couth and what’s not. Practice your skills at home, and they’ll become second nature.
- (5) Hire professionals. Don’t cut corners when it comes to marketing tools; prospective clients often see your marketing tools before they meet you. And don’t underestimate the importance of personal branding; hire an image consultant to help you leverage your personal brand.

Successful entrepreneurs recognize that branding is as personal as a signature and as significant as positive cash flow. Whether you’re Nordstrom or the small, corner boutique in North Salem, Massachusetts, you’ll benefit from analyzing your brand, scrutinizing your brand and probing your brand until it defines you and what you have to offer. It gives “brand new” a whole new meaning!

Peggy M. Parks is a well-known international image consultant, headquartered in Atlanta, and an authority in defining and promoting personal branding. You can reach her at peggy@theparksimagegroup.com or 404/266-3858.

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