

Growth Principle #4: Be Your Brand

Your brand should be a rock-solid promise of what you will deliver everyday.

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We're surrounded by brands everyday... the pen with your bank's logo, the designer handbag, the cross-trainers with a tell-tale swoop on the side, the McDonald's wrappers in your backseat. We see brands, we respond to brands, we buy brands - but how well do we excel at creating a brand for ourselves or our companies?

In business today branding is everything. If you are a small business owner your products, services, ads, promotional materials, facility and staff all have to project a uniform image that speaks to a target audience. If you are a career woman and want to climb the corporate ladder, you have to master the art of personal branding and learn to view yourself not as an employee, but rather as the President of Me, Inc.

What is a brand? A brand is a collection of symbols, experiences and associations connected with a product, a service, a person or an organization. People experience a brand through every point of contact with the product, service, company or person in question. People translate their experiences, expectations and sensory perceptions into a psychological, symbolic framework that becomes the brand's image in their mind. I won't kid you, developing a strong and appealing brand takes time, money and effort. And once a consumer has formed an opinion about a brand it's incredibly difficult to change it – so devise your brand wisely and adhere to it religiously.

Why does branding matter? I get this question all the time from entrepreneurs who feel that investing in branding strategies is a waste of time since they don't aspire to achieve iconic Nike, Coke or Wal-Mart status anyway. I'll tell you why. Branding builds trust. And without trust a business can't succeed. A brand is simply a promise of the value that customers will infallibly receive from you.

On a corporate level, consider the power of branding as we make buying decisions. Right now I own a VW Beetle convertible and I love my car. I've already decided that in a few years I will pass on my current car to my teenage daughter and purchase a new vehicle for myself. What car will I buy? That's right... another VW Beetle convertible! Why will I re-purchase a Beetle? Because Volkswagen is a strong brand that represents top-quality German engineering, affordability, reliability and fuel efficiency, as well as a car that's fun to drive. I trust that if I buy another Beetle I will have the same great experience that I have had with my current car. Volkswagen's brand image, customer loyalty and profitability are dependent upon on upholding the company's promise on a daily basis.

On a personal level, consider email. Everybody has email and anybody can send you a message, so when you scan your Inbox in the morning how do you decide whose messages you're going to read and respond to first? Whose messages are you going to send to the Trash unopened? The answer relates directly to personal branding. The name of the email sender represents a personal brand. It's a promise of the value you'll receive for taking the time to read the message. If you have a friend who forwards every silly chain letter and cartoon they receive, you probably won't regard messages from them very highly, but if a business associate regularly contacts you with leads, referrals or relevant news you will regard messages from them as extremely important.

What can branding do for you? People engaged in branding seek to develop or align the expectations behind the brand experience with the thing being sold, creating the impression that a brand associated with a product or service has certain characteristics that make it unique and desirable. A brand is one of the most valuable elements in an advertising campaign, because it demonstrates what the product or service being sold is able to offer in the marketplace.

Good branding offers several benefits:

1. **Premium prices.** Careful brand management, supported by a clever marketing campaign, can be highly successful in convincing consumers to pay high prices for products which are extremely cheap to make. By manipulating the projected image of your product or service, you can move customers beyond a logical valuation of the cost. This is why t-shirts at Madonna concerts are \$50 when they only cost .50 to make – good branding!
2. **Trust and loyalty.** When people have a positive experience with a brand, they're more likely to buy that product or service again. People who closely bond with a brand are not only more likely to re-purchase, but also to buy related items, to recommend the brand to others and to resist the lure of a competitor's low price. 'Harley Davidson' is tattooed on more bodies than any other brand – can you earn and anchor such loyalty in your own customers?
3. **Memorability.** A brand serves as a container for your reputation and good will. It's hard for customers to go back to "that store on 28th street" or to refer business to "some plumber named Dan." Memorability can come from using and sticking with an unusual color combination/logo (Target), distinctive behavior (Home Depot's greeters), a catchy name (Google, anyone?), or with an individual, even a style of clothing (Hillary Clinton's pantsuits). Develop your own identifiers and nail them to your name in the minds of the public.
4. **Lower expenses.** It takes money, time and passion to create a brand, but once it's created you can maintain it without having to tell the whole story about your product or service over and over again. For instance, a jingle people get stuck in their head continues to promote the company when it's not on the air. Levi's jeans continue to fly off the shelves even though you seldom see them advertised on TV anymore – that's because generations of people love Levi's and the company can afford to relax a little.

I certainly can't go into all the nuances of how to engage in branding in a short article, but I hope that you have developed a deep respect for the process of branding, and that you understand how the strength of your professional or personal brand will impact your success.

Align your entire business behind a strong brand that resonates with potential customers, and commit yourself to delivering on your promises, and sales will naturally rise.