What’s in a Brand? A Step-by-Step Guide for Companies at Every Size

Corporations like Apple, Nike, and Starbucks are known for their solid, instantly recognizable brands that are woven through everything they do. While the same can be said for many smaller businesses, building a brand from the ground up can feel daunting for entrepreneurs, especially if you’ve never done it before.

While you don’t need to spend millions creating the next iconic logo, it is worth going through the process of strategically developing your brand. Think of brand building as part of the foundation of your business. While a brand isn’t necessarily a tangible thing, it’s important for connecting with customers, shaping their perception of your company, and building trust among them. Plus, if you have a recognizable brand, it can help potential or one-time customers remember you or help you stay top of mind in the future.

These days, the strongest brands out there have a clear “why.” During every interaction with a business, customers are clear on why it exists, why it stands out, and why they should buy from it. With that in mind, here’s a step-by-step process that companies of any size can use to create a standout, memorable brand.

> *How do potential customers feel when they feel when they see your name, logo, and colors, or when they read your emails and social posts? Do they connect with your business? Do they want to be part of it? Will they remember it in the future? These questions are at the heart of branding.*

Step 1: Define “Who” Your Business Is

A business isn’t a living thing, of course, but it should embody some of the same elements. It needs to have a personality, to live by certain values, to have goals, and to provide a source of connection.

After all, a brand isn’t just a name and a logo, it’s about who your company is and how people feel when they see that name or logo. So, before you begin thinking about design elements, you have to define who your company is.

Mission and Goals

A great place to start is with your company’s mission and goals. You likely have some idea of your company’s main goals; they’re why you started your business or what you hope to achieve, both in the short and long term.

Your mission statement embodies that. Think of it as the action statement that describes what you’re aiming for and how you’re going to get there. Ideally, it should also reflect how you’ll do so in a way that stands out from other companies.

Keep it short and focused, like these well-known examples:

- **Tesla:** “To accelerate the world’s transition to sustainable energy.”
- **LinkedIn:** “To connect the world’s professionals to make them more productive and successful.”
- **Nordstrom:** “To give customers the most compelling shopping experience possible.”

Values

Once you have your mission statement—your guiding light, so to speak—start to think about your business’ values, or the core

principles you want your company and its employees to live by.

These might tangentially relate to your goals and mission, but feel free to think outside the box, too. Maybe you want to ensure that your employees and people who partner with the company feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions. One of your values, then, could be honesty or openness.

Try to keep your list to the five or six you feel most strongly about. This is a lesson we learned firsthand at Buffer. Originally, we had 10 values, but we found that was too many for most employees to remember. We narrowed them down to these six in 2018:

- Default to transparency
- Cultivate positivity
- Show gratitude
- Practice reflection
- Improve consistently
- Act beyond yourself

Your mission statement and values may live on your website or social accounts, or they may exist only for you and your employees. Either way, what's most important is determining how you will implement them and truly live by them day to day. More than just words on a page, your mission and values should be infused into every aspect of how you do business.

Candle company Keap's mission and values are all about reconnecting with yourself and restoring a balance with nature, and this "why" is infused throughout every aspect of the brand's imagery, copy, and marketing efforts. Learn more in this recent feature.

Audience

The best brands don’t appeal to everyone on the planet; rather, they aim to really resonate with a specific group of people. (This is especially true for small businesses with limited inventory and marketing budgets.)

To determine who your audience (or ideal audience) is, research who tends to buy your product or service the most. Think about who you had in mind when you started the business, too. What problem are you solving, and for whom? It can also be helpful to consider who your competitors are targeting and whether you want to serve the same group of people or reach an entirely different one.

Once you have a general idea of your target demographics, develop personas for them. Have fun with it! Name these proverbial people, sketch out their personalities, and really bring them to life in your head.

A local cooking school, for example, might choose to focus on one of these specific personas:

The Savvy Gourmet: Skilled in the kitchen, these cooking aficionados love mastering new skills that’ll impress their friends and are willing to work (and pay) to do so.

The Motivated Parent: These moms, dads, and caregivers are always seeking to broaden their kids’ horizons, build their interest in cooking, and keep them entertained on rainy Saturdays.

The New Homeowner: Whether they’re new college grads, transplants from roommate-filled apartments, or people who simply never learned their way around the kitchen, these folks want to learn cooking basics in a friendly, non-judgmental environment.

Once you have these “people” in mind, it’ll be easier to

develop a brand and content that speaks directly to them.

Step 2: Create a Cohesive Visual Identity

Now that you have a better idea of what you want to accomplish, what you want to stand by, and who you're talking and selling to, you can start to create a visual identity that matches that.

Don't even think about logos or other designed elements yet—start with the bigger picture. Consider:

- What moods or emotions do you want to evoke when people see your brand?
- What should people believe about your company, just by looking at it?
- Do you want to align with industry norms or stand apart from them? For example, both financial companies and health food brands tend to use the color green, so it's a decision for your brand whether to follow the norm or eschew it.

With this in mind, create mood boards that draw inspiration from things you see. It could be anything: the colors you see while on a walk, a design element from another brand that you'd like to emulate and make your own, or a piece of art that inspires you. Searching for brand style guides on Pinterest can also help you gather ideas.

Pinterest is an endless source of inspiration for visual identity. (Source)

Look for common themes in what you've pulled together. Is it colorful? Full of shades of gray? Is the imagery bright and saturated, or more muted? What does the typography look like?

All of these seemingly small things send a certain message. And if that’s the message you want to send, they can start to become the visual elements of your brand.

A graphic designer can help you develop a cohesive visual identity, but there are also free resources that can help you pull these elements together. There are plenty of free tools out there, including Hubspot’s color palette generator, Canva’s templates for logos, and Looka and Mojomox for all-in-one brand identity.

Browse Canva’s library of color palettes, or generate your own from a photo. (Source)

No matter which approach you choose, keep the big picture in mind and ensure the logo, fonts, brand colors, and imagery will all work together in service of your mission, audience, and overall goals.

A few things to remember:

- Brand colors are more than just the color on your logo. Most brands have a primary color and one to three supporting colors, including a neutral like a shade of black or white.
- You’ll want to choose at least two fonts: one for headlines or titles and one for supporting text.
- If design isn’t your forte, it’s okay to keep things simple. While it’s fun to be bold and creative, a basic logo (for example, your company name in a sleek, simple font) works perfectly well. You want your brand to stand out, but going *too* over-the-top can detract from a professional feel.
- Working with templates on sites like Canva is a great way to ensure design consistency across your website, marketing materials, social posts, and more.

Step 3: Find Your Voice

People can see your brand, and now they need to hear it (or read it on their screens). The voice you use when communicating with your audience via email, on social media, and in-person is an essential part of your brand that should align with your values and visuals.

Pay attention to how you speak personally and how you speak about the business. Then go back to how your audience will best connect with you. How do they want to be spoken to? How do you want them to feel? What tone and style will help them get to know what your company is all about?

Write down a few words and phrases that come to mind. Then, as you speak to customers or write social media posts, see what's working, what you like, and what your audience connects to. You can define and refine from there.

Inspirational, motivational, and full of emojis and abbreviations: The Peony Collective's brand speaks to its audience of Instagram-savvy entrepreneurs. (Source)
Here are a few things to consider as you develop your brand voice:

- **The overall tone you'd like to strike:** Think about how, if your brand could speak, it would talk to someone. Some brands are confident and authoritative (think Apple), others are warm and welcoming (like Starbucks), and a well-done few are funny and clever (just look at Taco Bell's Twitter feed).
- **The words and phrases you'd like to use regularly (and avoid):** This can go back to your original research on the emotions you want to evoke and your brand's values.
- **The writing style that you'll use:** Short, direct sentences have a different feel than longer, more

detailed ones, and things like exclamation points, emojis, and slang can all contribute to a different voice and tone.

This is another great time to pull examples of things you read and like, especially if they're for your target audience. Identifying the words, phrases, expressions, and styles that work (and those that don't) can help you slowly build out your own brand voice.

Step 4: Let it Grow

It's perfectly fine to tweak or modify your brand as you go. In fact, you should. Think of it as a living, breathing entity that evolves as your business and audience do, and as the world changes. While you do want to maintain consistency in your visuals and voice, it's perfectly fine to check in every now and then and see if there are elements of your brand that you'd like to alter, update, or remove.

If your budget allows, you could perform A/B tests with members of your ideal audience to see what resonates (for instance, running two Facebook ads with different text). Use this type of research to inform a particularly tough or close decision or to solidify that your brand is having the impact you'd like it to.

Build Your Brand

Now that you know what steps you need to take to start building your own brand, grab a notebook or open a blank document and start brainstorming. Then edit and refine your work, remembering that each of the elements above should work together, staying true to your vision, your goals for your business, and of course, your "why." It is, after all, what the most authentic, memorable brands are built on.

https://buffer.com/resources/whats-in-a-brand/