



Branding 101. "Branding" communicates the four key properties of an organization: their message, values, benefits, and relevant attributes. Four criteria that are key to developing a brand position:

1. It must focus on the product's or service's use and relevance to the customer.
2. It must be based upon the brand's strengths. Is it the biggest? The strongest? The best? Cheapest?
3. It should distinguish the company from its competitors through clear communication of the values and benefits the company offers over its competitors.
4. It must be easily understood. If the brand's message or personality is too complex, it can intimidate consumers and force them to look to other brands.

You Might Need Branding If... A big, well-known competitor moves onto your turf. The Home Depot moves into town. How will you differentiate your small hardware company? It's the question that's killed Main Streets all over America. Figure out the one thing that sets you apart from this business behemoth, and center your marketing around it. (Hint: It probably won't be price.)

Your products or services are very similar in features, benefits and price to

the competition's. The more interchangeable your offerings are with the next guy, the more you need a "hook" to get people to choose you. Is your hook great customer service? Is it lower fees? Find it, and tout it.

You're expanding into new markets where people don't know your company. Your current customers know you already, but people in other places don't have a clue what you're selling. This is a good time to educate them about your purpose and mission.

Employees don't have a consistent way of dealing with customers. Are employees all over the map in the way they approach, help and resolve customer questions and problems? A strategy can provide consistency and build your brand.

Customers can't sum up your product or service in one word. Great brands can be summarized in a word or two. Nike? Running shoes. Microsoft? Software. FedEx? Overnight delivery. Ask your customers to summarize your product or service in one or two words. If they can't do it, you need to work on the messages you're sending in the marketplace.

Is It Too Late To Start, Or Fix My Brand? Think it's too late to forge a brand strategy? It's never too late. Even if you've been in business 10 years without one, there are things you can do:

Take branding beyond advertising. Business owners tend to think of branding as advertising, when advertising is just one element of branding. Instead, envision branding as something that touches every part of your business, from your letterhead and logo to how employees answer the phone to how your supply chain runs. Branding is the integration of everything about your company to create consistency for customers, vendors, employees, suppliers—and you as the owner.

Improve your appearance. Image can be everything, whether you're a retailer or an accounting firm. If a storefront is inviting, clean and bright, people will be drawn to you. If it's dark, dank and disorderly, they'll move on. Chalk it up to human nature: Customers assume they'll get better service if your business looks nice. Maybe it's time for new paint.

Make clear promises. What's your ultimate promise to customers? Is it quick service, cheap prices or something else? Find your promise-and deliver on it.

Rediscover your purpose. Why are you in business? It can be easy to forget 15 years down the road why you started your company in the first place. Revisiting your primary purpose can spur new ideas and clarify your brand message.