

Image Is Everything

Image is everything, at least when it comes to branding. A brand in its truest sense is the perception and belief about who you are by the individuals aware of your company. Your brand is a culmination of every interaction someone has experienced with your company. Meaning, your brand is what your audience says it is. One of the frustrations for many companies is not understanding this or failing to embrace it. Often times, companies believe they know who they are and that their customers will automatically believe the same things about them as they do. Unfortunately, this is rarely true. More often than not, your customers will formulate their own ideas about who you are and what you stand for. In branding there are two complimentary features that depict the difference between what a company says they are and what an individual believes a company is. Identity is what a company says it is and image is what a customer or individual believes about a company. Understanding the differences and the nuances between identity and image, as well as how to shrink the gap between the two, will go a long way in helping a company achieve their business objectives.

A company's identity is specifically created through both strategic branding and the subsequent tactical application of core messages through sensory touch-points. An identity is every logo produced, color employed, package distributed, website launched, business card handed out, ad so on. In other words, an identity is everything that a company uses to convey who they are. Furthermore, being able to effectively connect with consumers one-on-one, genuinely respecting individuals, delivering value, and expressing relevant competitive distinctions, strengthens not only your company, but most importantly, your company's identity. By successfully crafting and consistently implementing an identity you are giving your company the best shot at effectively communicating who you are to your audience. Remember, your company is walking a very tight line between what you say you are and what others believe you are. However, the more strategic, specific, and steady you are in crafting and implementing your identity, the higher the likelihood is that you will be successful in garnering the "right" image from your audience.

As already stated, an identity is not an image. And unlike an identity, your company's image is not in your court. Image is what your audience says or believes about your brand, not what you say it is. Image is the perceptions, whether right or wrong, which an individual forms about who you are. They can be based on fact or fiction, direct contact, or word of mouth. An individual can decide for him or herself who your company is based on every piece of information on your website, or just one bad experience with a salesperson or product. While it may not seem fair for an individual to carelessly make up their own mind about who you are, it is their reality. Even in situations where your audience or an individual is very informed about what your company stands for, there is guaranteed to be some distance between your identity and image. It is this gap, between image and identity, between what you say and what your customer believes, that can cause so much frustration, and ultimately revenue loss. Fortunately, there are a few things you can do to drastically reduce this gap with the ultimate goal of having your identity and image be essentially the same thing.

So how do you reduce the gap between your company's identity and your company's image? Effective brand-building focuses on clear, consistent, communication in three steps, first of which begins in developing the strategy behind your brand. One of the key aspects in strategizing a brand that many companies fail to notice is looking at the bigger picture rather than focusing on specific marketing tools, which oftentimes can be a distraction in developing a clear and confident company. Clarify your

company's objectives, target audience, long-term goal, and personality in a way that is relevant and significant to the consumer. By elucidating initiatives, your company will have a greater sense of who you are and in turn, can reach out to both existing and potential customers.

The second step is encoding your strategy in every sensory touch-point. As human beings, emotions dominate our responses and instincts that essentially define how we interpret a brand. And as human beings, touch-points can be the gateways to brand loyalty. Utilize the tools around you, whether they are brochures, pamphlets, web sites, vehicle signage, stationery, or so on. However many marketing tools you choose to use, every small piece of the puzzle should reflect the bigger picture: the core message and personality of your brand. Your identity is crucial in relaying to the customer who and what your company is. Falling short of reflecting this within your touch-points can confuse the customer, which can ultimately result in the loss of revenue.

The third step comes from stewarding your brand, recognizing that someone has to be in charge as the brand manager, and that everyone else in the company is deputized as an ambassador. This doesn't mean a company dictatorship is needed; rather, a leader is necessary in guiding the company toward its long-term goals and initiatives. Furthermore, it's not just the leader who has a role in the company's success. Everyone working as a part of the company no matter how big or small of a position, plays a large role in achieving company goals. As was mentioned earlier, a customer's lifelong attitude towards your company can stem from one bad experience with a salesperson. Any individual a part of your company is responsible in relaying your brand; hence, every employee is a company ambassador. Image is everything, at least when it comes to branding. While you can control your identity, your image is left to the individual to concoct. As you walk this very real tension as a company help to reduce the gap by crafting and establishing strategic clarity. Encode this strategy in every sensory touch-point, and empower and train your employees to be good stewards of the brand representing who you are as ambassadors. By doing these things you will reduce the gap between who you say you and who your audience believes you are, ultimately, help to achieve your business objectives

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