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CREATE THE PERFECT BRAND

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Brand Consultant and Author of 'Create the perfect brand – Teach Yourself' published by Hodder

A brand is a powerful emotive force that influences consumer behaviour. Brands provoke feelings that connect with people emotionally and psychologically to build loyalty. They are valuable assets based on reputation, experience and expectation.

The brand lives in the minds of those who believe in it. Its integrity is constantly put to the test through the experiences of consumers and the actions of employees. Reputations can easily be broken and the popularity of online social networks place brands under ever-stronger scrutiny. A brand cannot rest on its laurels and to achieve sustainability it must constantly innovate to remain relevant to the consumer.

The underlying idea behind a brand becomes the ethos that drives and shapes an organisation. The brand becomes the compass to success, guiding decisions and strategy in a realisation of its values. In the majority of Small to Medium sized Enterprises (SME's), the brand is an extension of the founding entrepreneur's personality. The owner's passion comes through their business brand. It simply will not work if you contrive an image based on who you would like people to think you are - but in practice are not. Success is

achieved by following a unique path with conviction. Having a clear vision is the singular quality that unites successful brands, but each vision is unique.

A brand exists in three dimensions; the past, present and future. The past is its reputation, the present is the experience and the future is the expectation.

REPUTATION

Let's start with you. Your family and friends know what you look like, how you think and how you behave. If you do something unexpected or treat your friends poorly you understand that you may compromise your relationship. We all build a reputation with the people we are regularly in contact with. You can build that reputation or destroy it by your behaviour. It's the same with a business, a product or a service. A brand is built on reputation and it's easy to research if a brand has a good reputation. Most online trading sites encourage customers to write reviews of their purchases. A good review is an endorsement that attracts new customers and builds loyalty.

EXPERIENCE

The trading estates of Britain are the heartland of the UK's Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SME's). My experience is that they are often shabby and uninspiring. A typical business unit will have a badly signposted entrance that opens to a reception area with a worn and stained carpet. The connecting corridors are marked and tarnished. They can be dull places, but millions of people work in them. These businesses usually have a great product and a dedicated team but the environment lets them down.

The majority of SME's in the UK do not pay attention to their brand. They may have a great business, but this is not reflected in how they present themselves to the outside world. I have frequently met businesspeople whose eyes glaze over when you mention branding. They are proud that they have had success through their networks and personal contacts. Their own personal branding is typically good but they do not follow this through to their company.

If a consumer has no knowledge of a product and if there is no previous experience to judge it by, then all that is left is visual appearance and presentation. First impressions are very powerful. Visual image has an important part to play in positioning a brand and preparing us for the experience. Of course if the experience is lacking than the brand will flounder. But what if you have a great product and the presentation is poor?

So how good are we at judging character? Are we not all guilty of judging a book by its cover? There are many businesses that have a fantastic product or service but the visual presentation lets them down. A business may not get the opportunity to prove itself and its image becomes a stumbling block to brand success.

Potential customers need to 'get' the brand in an instant. You want to make sure that

everything you believe in comes across immediately. It is not easy to do this, as branding is so much more than a logo – service, environment, colour, imagery, etc. Your brand should be mirrored in every part of your company, from the product or service, to the environment, people and culture.

FUTURE - EXPECTATION

Branding builds trust and confidence. A familiar brand carries with it an expectation of performance. Based on its reputation and frequent experience a consumer builds an expectation of how the brand will perform in the future. For example, when you visit your favourite restaurant you expect good service and an enjoyable evening based on past experience.

If the service is poor or the food disappointing it will make you think twice about returning. Every business will encounter a crisis at some point but it's how the crisis is handled that builds or sinks the brand.

Consumers demand transparency. They do not want to be fooled. Business people are expected to justify their decisions to investors. In an age of whistle blowing and revelations about impropriety, the future of brands depends on honesty and integrity. A brand has to 'do the right thing' if it is to capture the heart of the consumer.



IN THE MAJORITY OF SME'S, THE BRAND IS AN EXTENSION OF THE FOUNDING ENTREPRENEUR'S PERSONALITY.