

Seven Branding Tips for Small Businesses

Many entrepreneurs think of branding as something done by only very large companies, like Mercedes or Nike. However, branding is done by all companies, regardless of size — the only difference is how actively they do it. For small businesses, taking an active approach to branding is critical, and especially during a tight economy, says Gemini Babla, Director of Creative Services who oversees branding initiatives for Sony Electronics Inc. in the USA.

A brand is the set of impressions people have about a company that they may have gained through its advertisements and other communications, the experience of buying and using the company's products or services, and the interactions they have with the company itself. Companies manage their brand through careful presentation of an image to create a favorable perception and to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

Babla, who oversees Sony's internal and external brand activities, offers seven easy and inexpensive strategies to help small business owners develop their brand — and improve their bottom line.

Define your brand

If you haven't already, draft a one-page description of your business. It helps to get an outside perspective; ask people who interact with your company about their perceptions. How would they describe it? What do they think you do? What do they like about it? How do you compare to competitors? Are there things your company could improve? Then, write down what your business stands for. "This is your value proposition. You need to make it your brand mantra," Babla says.

Coming from a family with several members who own businesses, Babla can relate to a small business owner's needs. Her father is a SCORE counselor, and her parents own an art gallery. "They're known for exceptional service and a

specific style of art. Those things don't change. What defines your business shouldn't either."

Conduct a brand audit

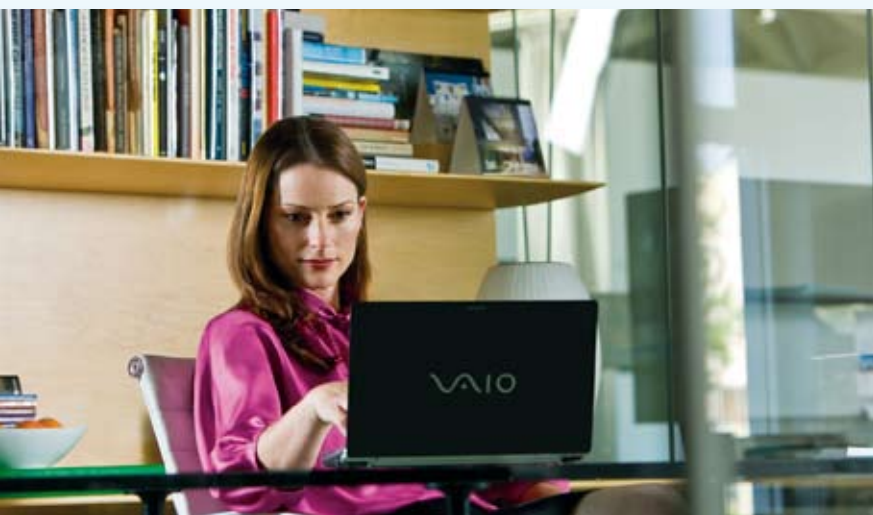
Once you've defined your brand, examine every component of your brand — for example, your logo, business cards, signage, website, on-hold messaging and email signature — and make sure they are consistent with what you want your image to be. "Sony places heavy emphasis on consistency, because that consistency creates credibility in the mind of the consumer."

Keep your brand top of mind

A down economy is the time to re-affirm your value proposition with your customers and prospects. "Keep your company and brand top of mind. The economy will turn around eventually, so you want to be the first choice when they're ready to buy," Babla says.

Use Web 2.0

Branding and Web 2.0 go together well; branding is reinforced through social interaction, and Web 2.0 is social media. Use Web 2.0 — blogs, forums, wikis, etc. — to create a conversation with consumers or key stakeholders, and to demonstrate the unique value you provide. But "don't just talk about yourself," says Babla. "Let the content be user-generated. Blogs enable dialogues, which tell companies what to change."



Live the brand

Your employees are the biggest stewards of your brand. "Branding is as much about your people as anything else. The best interactions come from one-on-one conversations between executives, employees, suppliers and customers," Babla says. "Employees who are engaged with your brand management philosophy will become brand ambassadors for your company."

Measure your performance

Brand measurement can be done, but it's tricky because brands are emotional and emotions/intangibles are hard to measure. "We have a number of tracking mechanisms at Sony Electronics," Babla says. "We measure our communications and track brand recall, but we also look at our brand health through perceived association and brand loyalty as part of our long term assessment. You can also talk to your customers and your employees to gain insight." Because branding is a long-term effort, it may take up to six months before a small business will see results from a concerted effort.

Don't stop

Don't abandon your branding efforts, even when times are tough. This way, you'll be ready when the economy rebounds, and consumers will remember you were there.



Q&A with Gemini Babla: Why Branding Is Important in a Tight Economy

Q: Is it important to continue brand building in a difficult economic climate? Why?

Babla: It pays off. Studies have shown that stocks of companies with both high brand awareness and high employee "brand engagement" return over 300% more than the S&P 500 and nearly twice as much as companies that just have high brand awareness.



Branding is often confused with advertising and marketing. That's unfortunate, because understanding your brand is vital to the bottom line. Studies show that companies that market their product or services without first establishing their brand identity are not likely to achieve return on investment. If you're spending money to advertise without being connected to a brand position, you may as well flush the money down the drain.

Q: What can a small business learn from Sony?

Babla: Large budgets aren't the key to strong marketing. Instead, focus on your audience and provide quality, quality, quality in everything you do.

Q: What advice would you give a small business owner right now?

Babla: Do what you say you're going to do. This may sound like common sense, but one of the primary drivers of brand loyalty is a consistent experience. If you say you are going to have the photographs ready on a set day, be sure they are ready. Positive experiences lead to good feelings, which lead to customers telling their friends. Don't forget that bad experiences spread much faster and are harder to overcome...if you get a chance at all.