



5 B2B Brand-Building Essentials

Clarity, Sustainability, Simplicity, Proof, Evolution

By Jean Van Rensselar

From the buyer's perspective, the brand is both a shortcut and an insurance policy. It assures them that they can expect certain qualities from a product or service and it frees them from doing much (or any) investigation themselves. This is why people in a hurry are more likely to choose brands they know.

While this is true for low-ticket items, it's surprisingly true for high ticket items as well---especially if those items are complex. Badgered on all sides to make a purchase decision on complicated technology and having few resources to verify claims, risk-averse decisions makers will go with the well branded products and services every time. The lesson for businesses with unbranded or poorly branded products and services is that when you make claims, provide hard proof of those claims in the simplest terms possible. In the buyer's eyes, with obscure brands nothing is a given.

Creating a brand is complex, mind-numbingly hard work. The good news is that once the brand is in place, the function of branding---implementing the brand---is very easy. Here 5 guidelines to get you started.

1. Know What You're Selling

A quality product/service that delivers superior performance is the foundation of a strong brand. When it comes to technical products and services, quality and reliability are (nearly always) prerequisites to entry, but not enough to set your brand apart from the competition.

While *knowing what you're selling* would seem to be a given, this is the #1 area where businesses fall short---not necessarily overestimating how much the market values their product, but more often missing exactly which aspects the market values most. The business ends up promoting the wrong attributes.

2. Identify a Significant, Relevant, and Sustainable Difference

Consider that you aren't selling a product or service; rather you're selling the difference it will make in the buyer's business. That difference has to be measurable, but not necessarily in terms

of ROI. So ask yourself, how will this make a measureable difference in another business? If you can't honestly answer that question then you have 3 choices:

1. Change attributes of your offering until you create a version that does make a difference.
2. Explore a new market where your product will make a measurable difference.
2. Cut your losses and abandon your venture.

As soon as you start promoting your brand, you are making a promise to your market that you must deliver on or, as far as the buyer is concerned, you are over. Remember, your brand is nothing more or less than your fidelity to your promise. So as you are considering brand options, be sure that you can sustain that promise into the foreseeable future.

3. Distill that Difference into a Simple Idea

The more vague and complex your brand, the more difficulty you'll have conveying it to your market. Once you're sure what you want to promote, boil it down to the simplest possible terms (as Albert Einstein put it, "As simple as possible, but no simpler").

No one should have to guess what you're getting at or read through several paragraphs to figure it out. Law enforcement officers are trained to recognize over-explaining as a sign of deception. It's the same with brand differences---if it takes too long to explain, either you don't really have a difference or you aren't clear on what it is yourself. Ideally you should be able to explain your brand in one short sentence.

4. Find a Way to Prove that Difference

Sometimes the proof is obvious to prospects. Much of the time, though, the only way for buyers to verify a claim is to purchase the product on faith and use it. This is OK for low cost, low risk products (pens, not fire extinguishers), but not for expensive technical products and services. Be sure that your brand difference is provable before purchase, through:

- Demonstrations
- No-risk trials
- Case studies and References
- The all powerful unconditional guarantee.

Another way is to make the brand difference more transparent before the sale. For example, if personal service is your primary brand attribute, then offer personal service during the selling process by submitting a thorough proposal, being available 24/7, following up diligently, and attending to details that other companies neglect.

5. Continually Reinforce and Evolve the Brand

Once you've developed your brand, introduced it to the market, and it's achieved success, remember to continually evolve your brand's difference. In other words, pull further and further away from the pack by making your brand difference continually more valuable.

Finally, achieving and building on recognition is the key to brand success. Your branding effort must permeate your entire organization and communicate through all marketing channels with one voice, in the same tone, and in the same style. In other words, your brand image must be consistent and constant across all channels of communication.

About the Author

Jean Van Rensselaar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized technical-oriented companies. You can reach her at Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com or 630-363-8081.