

Finding Your Brand Identity

In a Competitive Business World

YOUR LOGO HERE

By Tom Wilkowske

Consider the history of the word “brand.” (We know, this is a business magazine, so we’ll keep the English lesson short.) Back in Merry Olde England, the word “brand” meant a torch—something that offered light and a little heat. Fast forward a half a millennium and spin the globe a few thousand miles, and cowboys in the American West are “branding” cattle—that is, putting their employers’ marks on cows with a red-hot iron.

Even today, a brand should shine some light on your product or service, generate some emotional heat as well and distinguish it from the competition.

But “brand” is also a process—not just a what—but a how; not just a noun—but also a verb, a thing you do.

Wait! Set that red-hot iron down. Merely slapping a logo and catchphrase on your business (“La-Z-Bar Ranch, tenderest, leanest, purdyest steers in town”) won’t cut it. First, you need to do some serious brainwork about what truly makes your business stand out from the herd. Next, your employees, from cooks to cowboys, need to understand what sets the business apart and then build that into their daily work.

Only then should you start talking about branding or marketing or an advertising campaign—whether the Z should be lazy, crooked, flying or double.

“Creating a ‘cool’ logo and color palette and a cool look and feel is great for the short term,” says Pascha Parks, vice president with the JPG Group advertising and marketing agency, which has offices in Duluth and Virginia. “But if the product or service doesn’t align with it and the culture of your business doesn’t, customers are going to see through that very quickly.”

A brand starts with a company looking inward.

“Your brand is your identity,” says Parks. “For a lot of our clients, I’m their brand manager and I’m obsessive about it. A client might say ‘we need to do a brochure,’ or ‘we need to do an ad.’ We can do all of those things, but how does it tie into their brand?”

Ikonics Corporation’s Vice President of Marketing, Parnell Thill, recommends the following approach for companies getting started with branding:

“Sit down with the people in your organization and figure out how you are distinct from competitive peers. If you don’t know, you’d better find out,” he said. “Consumers can quickly tell if claims aren’t borne out by their experience. They’re skeptical of overly broad claims and rarely base buying decisions on them. ‘Joe’s Body Shop, we’re the best.’ ‘Frank’s Painting, we’re the best.’ Consumers fail to hear those messages because they are practically meaningless.”

Besides “we’re the best,” Thill suggests avoiding these over-used, clichéd mission/identity statements:



Pascha Parks with client John Heino of Como Oil

“We care more.”
 “We try harder.”
 “We have the best employees.”
 “We’ve been here the longest.”
 “We have the best product.”
 Another common mistake, according to Thill, is when “Everyone tries to claim the high ground.”
 “All watch makers don’t have to

pretend to be making Rolexes,” he said. “Whereas Rolex may have brand authority, meaning it can charge a premium for its products based on its brand strength, Timex, which makes functional, reasonably priced watches for the masses, probably has greater brand recognition.”



Parnell Thill of Ikonics Corporation

Thill, former English teacher with a Masters Degree in linguistics, stresses the “do” form of the word “brand.”

“You take a branding iron and put it on the side of your cow to distinguish your cow from the other guy’s cow,” he

says. “Those cows may have had the exact same parents. So what is the difference between Cow A and Cow B? There’s no functional difference to consumers.”

In other words, both produce beef that nourishes the customer.

“But we as humans and as consumers need to stereotype, because we don’t have the time to literally inspect every decision we make,” he adds.

That doesn’t mean subtle differences aren’t important to customers.

“If Cow A stands for free-range, healthy living and ate the finest grains, that’s going to appeal to a certain consumer,” Thill said. “Cow B maybe stresses the super flavor, the marbling, the juiciness. That’s going to appeal to a different crowd.”

Briana Von Elbe, owner and account executive with Pearson & Von Elbe Advertising in Hermantown, has had that experience with a client, Erberts & Gerberts, a sub sandwich restaurant company.

It has distinct customer bases, including downtown business people, busy moms and college students. While its product is the same, reaching those different market segments is done through different approaches. For example, its radio ads for younger people play on the rock stations and use rock music, whereas those aimed at the business crowd plays on AM radio, with less edgy music.

“Figure out your position, determine what you’re all about before you start your marketing plan. The business plan should get done first. If you don’t know what your business is about, your logo isn’t going to identify it for you,” she says.

Since marketing and advertising budgets aren’t limitless, Von Elbe says businesses focus on something dubbed ROI—return on investment. A business may be open to diverse types of customers, but it helps to focus branding and messages on those who are best for your business.

“So many businesses don’t know who their customers are,” Von Elbe continues. “They don’t track their zip codes or their demographics; they just guess.”

Von Elbe doesn’t allow her clients to guess.

“I go through monthly reviews with my clients, and some of them are surprised,” she says. “They might think, no, I don’t do any business in Hibbing, but looking at their numbers, Hibbing is strong. You can’t go by memory.”

Sometimes, a logo can help convey a subtle message without stating things explicitly. In the case of an auto repair shop, she says, “You don’t have to say ‘I only work on Porsches,’ but maybe your logo says that for you” by incorporating a European-looking sports car.

BRAND SUSTAINABILITY

Allenfall’s Fine Apparel for Men has held tight to their brand for more than 60 years. That’s more than 60 years in a market that’s seen several clothing stores come and go. Ed Gould of Allenfall’s feels that not watering down your business’ core identity and maintaining consistent quality are two ways to maintain a brand over a long period of time.

“Understanding that you can’t be everything to everyone is a good thing to recognize immediately,” said Gould. “Otherwise, you’ll lose your core customers—and eventually your brand identity. Stay true to what you do—because your best brand should be the name above your door.”

Thill says the history of Ikonics illustrates how a company can use branding to help it connect with new customers who may be arriving from different paths than the company’s original customer base.

Ikonics started in 1952 as Chroma-Glo, a screen printer specializing in the printing of metallized adhesive labels. Eventually, Chroma-Glo became Chromaline and in the ensuing decades earned considerable brand recognition among screen printers.

When the company began to target non-screen printing markets, it was clear that the Chromaline brand, such a valuable asset in marketing to screen printers, meant nothing whatsoever to these newly targeted markets.

Thus, the name Ikonics, based on the Greek “eikon,” or image, was created as an overall brand for the company, even as its individual brands in specialty markets continue to be prosecuted.

“It became clear that we could take much of the same core technical competencies and apply them to other markets,” Thill says.

A subtext in this history lesson is flexibility: the very nature of the company—certainly its primary emphasis—has been adapted over the decades and that innovative attribute remains with the company to this day. Such self-awareness can help a company thrive and it can also form the basis of its brand.

Parks says every business needs a brand champion. Although she serves as de facto brand champion for some of JPG Group’s clients, Parks suggests it’s best if someone in the company—the owner or a top manager—fills that role.

“They say, here’s our brand, here’s who we are, and they’re driving that through the culture of the company. We develop your brand, but it’s based on their CEO’s beliefs and vision of how they want



Briana von Elbe with clients Suzanne and Dennis Kachelmyer of Harley Davidson Sport Center

to get there. Otherwise, if your account executive at your ad agency leaves, you have to start all over again.”

Likewise, such self-searching can be daunting for some businesses.

“Honestly, I think some clients are scared to go through that process, but that’s

where true marketing professionals can help,” says Parks. “It’s easier to target and sell your product if you know who you are and who your audience is.” **D**

Tom Wilkowske is a freelance writer based in Duluth.



Ed Gould and John Mohn of Allenfall's

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