

What is a Brand?

Simply put, a brand is a promise to your customer.

When describing a brand, it's tempting to simply list the attributes of your business, describe your product line or point to your logo and tagline. But a brand is more than that—a brand promises a unique benefit to your customer.

This benefit may be:

1. Pragmatic (Volvo = I'm safe)
2. Emotional (iPod = I'm cool)
3. Experiential (American Girl = I'm having a special occasion with my daughter)
4. Self-Expressive (Yoplait = I'm fighting breast cancer)

In fact, the intangible benefits are often the most important. Women's skin care lines are virtually identical but Olay leads the pack in promising youth. Macs have very pragmatic benefits but the Mac v. PC ads are more about what kind of person you want to be (or don't want to be).

Example:

In 2004, Roy Disney perfectly summarized the intangible benefits of the Disney brand:

The Walt Disney Company is more than just a business. It is an authentic American icon -- which is to say that over the years it has come to stand for something real and meaningful and worthwhile to millions of people of all ages and backgrounds around the world.

This is not something you can describe easily on a balance sheet, but it is tangible enough. Indeed, it is the foundation on which everything we have accomplished as a company -- both artistically and financially -- is based.

I believe our mission has always been to be bringers of joy, to be affirmers of the good in each of us, to be -- in subtle ways -- teachers. To speak, as Walt once put it, "not to children but to the child in each of us."

We do this through great storytelling, by giving our guests a few hours in another world where their cares can be momentarily put aside, by creating memories that will remain with them forever.

This is the core of what we've come to call "Disney..."

Notice that Disney did not describe their brand in terms of amusement parks, cartoons, films or products. They describe their brand in terms of the experience people get from Disney. It's no coincidence that park staff call the customers "guests" and refer to the employee break areas as "backstage".

How to Create a Brand

Because a brand promises your customer something unique, it's important to truly understand your product or service and your target audience.

Your brand must offer your target customer something important to them, whether it's a goal-oriented benefit or simply a new way of defining themselves. Your brand must show that your business is uniquely suited to providing this benefit and that your competitors cannot offer it.

1. **Review your product or service offerings.**

What are your strengths? Weaknesses? What are your best selling products?
What do customers say they like about your business?

2. **Analyze your target audience.**

What does your primary customer base want? Besides the product, what are they buying? Convenience or occasion? Fitting in or standing out? Brand name or handmade? What do they want their purchases to say about who they are and what they value? Also look at customers you'd like to attract. What do they want that you are not offering (and not necessarily in terms of product line)?

3. **Look at your competition.**

What are they providing their customers? What needs are they meeting—or not meeting? How can you capitalize on this? How can you differentiate yourself from them? (A perfect example here is the current Democratic primary. The candidates are neatly positioning themselves—their brand—to offer what the other doesn't. One emphasizes experience so the other offers change. It doesn't matter that their policy positions are nearly identical—they've successfully created a key distinction between themselves.)

4. **Condense these ideas.**

It's important to be able to sum up a brand in a sentence or two—any longer and you haven't successfully pinpointed the promise your business offers. Reread Disney's description of the company's brand and notice how succinct it is. You should also develop a longer narrative that expands upon that brand and can provide the basis for all your brand follow up.

5. **Test the brand.**

Run your brand statement by friends, loyal customers or colleagues. They can help you see if you are trying to force your business into a brand that doesn't fit well—or if you are missing some key strengths of your business.

Example:

In 2004, with the help of Vangel and Associates, we created the *District* brand. It started with surveys of customers and members and a number of focus groups conducted by the folks at Vangel.

We learned that the terms “historic,” “active” and “artistic” tested positively with our customers. Our customer base was also very diverse, to the point where we had different target audiences for different hours of the day and night—meaning that customers’ needs changed over a 24-hour period. We also learned that the second most popular reason people came downtown was for entertainment, an element we had not really focused on in the past.

We also knew we had to address a number of issues. Customers perceived a lack of parking and retail options and many thought there were only 10 or 12 restaurants downtown. Members felt that outlying areas (such as Flat Branch) were not perceived as part of downtown. Finally, the term “downtown” is often associated with rows of vacant and crumbling buildings, rather than a bustling and vital commercial center.

We condensed this down to two different goals. First, we wanted to counteract the perception that our selection of products and services was lower than in other areas—in other words, we needed to emphasize how much we offered. Second, we wanted to convey a sense of the experience of being downtown. We stand out from other shopping areas because we are infused with history, art and activity.

Sample Branding Statement

Our branding statement should sound familiar to everyone by now:

The District is Columbia’s bustling and vibrant central city. Nestled between three colleges, *The District* is a hip, active, and artistic community. Whether it’s coffee in the morning or martinis at midnight, *The District’s* friendly and energetic vibe is up early and stays out late. *The District’s* lively mix of historic architecture, sidewalk cafes and retail shops provide the perfect setting for a business meeting, lunch with a friend or a night on the town.

With 110 unique shops, 70 bars and restaurants, 45 live performances a week, and 5900 parking spots, you’ll find plenty of things to do. We’re 43 not-so-square blocks you’ll love to discover.

The final tag line is the one we use most in our advertising. However, the first paragraph provides the basis for everything else—from website copy to media interviews to visitors’ guides. The more we say it, the more it sinks in.

Just take a look at *Inside Columbia's* Best of Columbia 2007 article:

Best Place to Take a Visitor

"What's there to do around here?" Aunt Harriet whines. Oh, not much — just The District. That's 43 blocks of downtown Columbia, which boasts 110 unique shops, 70 bars and restaurants, 45 live performances a week, as well as a lively mixture of historical architecture and not-so-historical college students. It's hip, it's hot, and it's fun. There are 5,900 parking places, more than enough to hide Auntie's '53 Packard.

And just in case you're wondering, no, we had nothing to do with this. *Inside Columbia* picked up on our branding language all on their own.

What now?

A brand is built from the inside out so not only do all your collateral materials (ads, websites, stationary, etc.) need to reflect the brand, but every point of contact a customer has with your business must as well.

How do you answer the phone? How do you train your staff? What is your dress code? What does your front window look like? If you promise unique products, are you sure the shop next door doesn't carry the same line? If you promise local foods, does a truck show up every morning with canned soup? If you're the insurance agency who cares, do you go out of your way for your customers? (Kelly Veach is my agent and he actually runs over to my office to pick up my check when he knows I'm too busy to get away. When Commerce Bank took over local bank BNS, every customer received a phone call asking how they were doing with the transition and if they had any problems—a personal touch from a bank that was seen as a "chain".)

Example:

Vangel also provided us with a logo, our tagline (Discover *The District*) and even a color palette. Since then, we've been careful to maintain this visual look. Our banners are orange and blue and carry our logo and message. Our wayfinding signs fit our color and design scheme as well. (Note: both these were SBD projects—they are very supportive of the brand.)

We also keep on message—to the point where it's really sinking in. We use final tag line (70 bars and restaurants...) throughout most of our advertising and other collateral materials. When I speak to reporters, I talk about historic architecture, our range of unique shops, our live music venues and the vitality and excitement of *The District*. All my board members have also picked up on the brand, cementing it in the mind of our customers.

Advertising is key but creating a strong brand should be the first step. It will help you save money, keep your message consistent and help you make better advertising decisions down the road.