

What is a Brand?

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Think of your brand as a person

When I was in the advertising agency world, every ad agency espoused a different philosophy on what constitutes a brand. At their core, the brand philosophies were all very similar; but in my opinion one ad agency I worked for – and it was one of the most famous advertising agencies in the world – expressed it best. Before we did any marketing or advertising, we had to describe the company in terms of being a person. If the company were a person, would he/she be: Warm and friendly? Helpful and approachable? Inventive and forward-thinking? Active and adventurous? Intellectual and scholarly? Dependable and unfailing? And so on.

Think, for example, of Apple (inventive and forward-thinking). Think of Nike (active and adventurous). In our discussions, there wasn't always a clear-cut answer, and meetings often generated long and spirited debates. But once we had determined what kind of person the organization was, it helped us shape the brand and the whole marketing approach. It showed us the way forward.

Your brand is owned by every employee

A brand is so much more than a logo or an advertisement or a brochure. A brand permeates the whole ethos of an organization. Consequently, it should be reflected in every piece of communication that emerges from the organization. And it should be reinforced by every employee every time they interact with a potential client, customer or patient.

Every single member of the organization contributes to the company's brand. The receptionist may be the customer's first introduction to the organization. If you're striving to create a friendly brand personality and your receptionist is rude or unhelpful to a potential client, you've damaged a little piece of the brand. The sales people tending your exhibit booth at a conference are missionaries to the attendees who stop by; they can convert an interested party...or turn them off before any serious relationship can even develop. And, of course, the CEO is often the voice of the company to the media and the public and sets the tone for the entire organization.

Reinforce it every day

Whatever kind of person you want your company to be, whatever brand personality you want to project, every employee top to bottom must try to reinforce it. Every day. Even if you have a marketing department, every person in your organization is a charter member of the brand whether they know it or not.

You may not be an Apple or a Nike – chances are that you're not – so you may not have the luxury of a huge advertising budget to run spectacular image campaigns on television. What that means is you must project who you are one brochure at a time, one print ad at a time, one email message at a time, one exhibit conversation at a time, one customer phone call at a time. Collectively, like bricks in a wall, you will build your brand.