

9 Branding Tips For Small Businesses

Think branding is only for large multi-national corporations? Think again. Here are 9 easy tips you can use to grow your brand with your customers.

1. The design of your logo really doesn't matter. Would you choose MSN as your search engine over Google because of their logo? No, having a nice professional logo is great, but it very rarely increases sales. I'm all for a professional logo, but don't think you need to spend a fortune on it. It's more important to include your logo on every piece of communication. Put it on business cards, letterhead, envelopes, invoices, yellow page ads, building signage, newsletters, etc...

2. Have a professional website. It's not just good enough to just have a website, you must reflect your brand image. If you're known as a top notch photographer, the last thing you want is a website designed 10 years ago. It doesn't reflect well on you. Everyone, yes everyone, uses the web today to check references. If someone recommends your service, you can almost guarantee that they will go online to look for you. Your website design should be updated at least every two years to stay current.

3. Blogs are good. Blogs help your business on multiple levels. First off, valuable content on a consistent basis will make you look like an expert. People are looking for experts, not apprentices. The software that powers blogs has multiple advantages. It's very easy to publish. It's a database driven environment where style is separate from content so you will not need to go back to your web design agency for every little change. And use of tags and sitemaps make basic search engine optimization easy. But the real reason blogs are great is that they enable conversation. Two-way dialog is much more valuable than a company that just dumps messaging and collateral on their customers.

4. Blogs are good, but they're just one tool. A blog should not be your sole marketing strategy. You should have a comprehensive multi-touch marketing plan to get your value proposition in front of your target audience. This can take many forms. You can launch a direct mail campaign, email campaign, host a webinar, sponsor a local event, attend a trade show, attend networking events, cold call prospects, win awards, etc... There are a thousand different ways for you to be noticed. You have to find the best combination of methods for your strategic goals. Data shows that people need to be exposed to a brand at least seven times before they buy. If you simply do one touch and stop, you're wasting valuable budget dollars and probably wondering why your efforts are not successful.

5. Prepare a one page corporate overview. This one pager will be vital as a leave behind when you meet a prospect. Use short sentences in short paragraphs - people like to read quickly. Also make it very conversational; it's not a white paper. Your one page overview should include your value proposition, target audience benefits, previous audience experience and a mini-case study - and don't forget your contact information.

6. Participate in local business events. And by participate, I mean be on a committee. Just showing up at events is great, but you're just a face in the crowd. Ask to be on one of the committees. Believe it or not, it's as simple as just asking most of the time. Groups are looking for volunteer help and it's a great way to elevate your status and visibility among the entire organization.

7. Do what you say you're going to do. I know it may sound like common sense, but one of the primary drivers of brand loyalty is a consistent experience. If you say you're going to have the photographs ready on a set day, be sure they are ready. Nothing leaves a bad taste in someone's mouth like missed expectations. Positive experiences lead to good feelings which lead to telling their friends. But don't forget that bad experiences spread much faster and are harder to overcome - if you get a chance at all.

8. Stand for something. People latch on to something they can understand and appreciate. If you're trying to be everything to everybody, chances are you'll attract no one. If you think it's too controversial to choose a niche, remember the power of being seen as an expert. Experts are not good at everything, they're awesome at one thing. This allows you to better position yourself and charge more for your services. People seek out experts, not generalists.

9. Realize that you're not in control of your brand. That's right, you only set the direction for your brand. Your actual brand image is determined by your audience. You can use these tips to ensure alignment between your desired brand image and your actual brand image in the minds of your customers. Branding isn't a one shot deal, it's an on-going juggling act of marketing, research and conversation. If you're not tapping into those conversations with your audience, how do you know what their real impression of you is? How will you know how to address it? Brand growth comes from alignment. You have to ensure that your actions, stationary, website and marketing efforts put out the right image. But you cannot stop there; Those are pre-sales activities that get you noticed and hopefully bought. You also have to ensure that all actions and engagements during the sale and post-sale are positive and in line with your desired brand image. If your audience has a different view of you than you'd like, then you need help. And it's probably best to bring in an outside perspective.

BONUS TIP #10: Branding is as much about your people as anything else. Never forget that the best interactions come from one-on-one conversations between executives, employees, suppliers, and customers. Employees that want to help and do the best job possible go a long way.

Proper branding is critical to your long term success. A lot of people think of branding as logo development. But in reality, branding is managing the thoughts and feelings of your customers to ensure that you are what they desire. If your desired brand image isn't what's in the minds of your target audience, you've got to figure out where the gaps are and how to address them. And fixing those issues is hard work because the old adage still rings true - the customer is always right.

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