

Branding Part 1

It's All About Branding

Use your store's individuality to make your mark.

By Allison Deerr

Editor's note: This is the first article in a two-part series discussing the importance of developing a distinguishable store brand. This story offers an in-depth discussion of what branding is and why it's valuable, while the second article ("Your Unique Brand", pg. 50) explains in detail the best way to discover and develop your brand.

Say 'Coca Cola' or 'McDonald's' and it evokes a wave of perceptions about the company and the product.

Say 'Macy's' or 'Target' and you have an immediate picture in your mind of the retail store and what shopping there will be like.

What you're reacting to is the brand. However, a brand is more than a name, a logo or a slogan. A brand is a promise: when you come into this store or buy this product, here's what you can expect. Brand has also been described as the connection between the consumer and the company.

Brand is a living, breathing emotion for people about how they experience life, adds T. Scott Gross, a Kerrville, Tex.-based speaker and the author of "Positively Outrageous Customer Service" (Dearborn, 2004).

"For consumers, it's about lifestyle. How do I want to be seen as a bride, what is that worth to me, how much is my Dad willing to pay for this dress, what does this mean to his lifestyle?" Gross says.

A brand is nothing more than an expectation.

"I see your logo, I think your brand. What picture am I getting? If I don't get a picture, it's not a good brand. That's almost worse than if I got a bad picture. With a bad picture, at least I know who you are," he says.

"Brands are really intangible. The reason most people don't try to tackle branding is because it's like smoke and mirrors. It's like magic dust. It's that intangible feeling you have when you ride a Harley Davidson versus a Honda, or drink a glass of Kendall-Jackson wine versus a house brand. What is that worth?" says Daniel Stiff, the Baltimore-based author of "Sell The Brand First: How to Sell Your Brand and Create Lasting Customer Loyalty" (McGraw-Hill, 2006).

A brand tells the customers: This is who we are; this is what we do, says Publicist Gail Sideman of Milwaukee. "Hear the jingle, read your tagline, see your logo - they know exactly who you are."

The good news for independent bridal retailers is this: You don't have to be big to be a brand. Take the example of the independent hardware store versus the big box home improvement center. Many owners of small hardware stores believed that when Home Depot, Lowes, and all the big warehouse stores started coming forward, the small stores would literally go out of business in a year.

"The good ones didn't," Stiff points out, "and the reason they didn't was because they were business people who recognized the hard-to-put-a-price-on element called service. In a small hardware store, they haven't gone away from the idea that when you're in this store, I'm going to take you all the way through a project."

Stiff continues, "The tendency for many small businesses is to fold their tents saying, 'I don't have enough resources, I don't have enough people and I don't have the largest selection', when they can succeed because service is such a strong component."

The fact that an independent full-service bridal store can offer customized solutions and develop personal relationships with customers is huge, Stiff says.

Size Doesn't Matter;
Every Store Brands

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Too many small businesses believe that a brand can only be built by spending advertising dollars and promoting in the local newspaper.

"They don't know they have a brand, don't know they are reinforcing a brand or don't think they are smart enough to know what a brand is," Stiff says. "Many small business owners do brand and reinforce the brand intuitively. What I try to do is make it intentional."

The small business brand advantage is that the owner can walk around the counter and say, "Hi, I'm Mary. This is my store," Gross asserts. "Customers like this - it gives them status. There's no excuse not to personalize service because we have computers for memory."

Branding helps your store tell its story. A key part of branding is great storytelling. Bridal retail is full of "wow" stories, the things that make your staff, your store and your experience special. Branding allows you to use those real-life experiences to promote your business.

"We've almost drilled down buying and selling to such a logical thing that we forget the emotions that go into a purchase and how we experience that bridal shop," Stiff says. "We make it about the \$600 dress instead of the \$1,000 dress and not: 'You need to look your very best and isn't that worth a lot more?' and 'We're going to take care of you. Here's our brand story.'"

What many independent business owners do is work not on the brand but on the business, Gross explains, the physical rather than the mental aspects.

"The question is: When I say the name of your store, do I get a picture? If I do, what is that picture? That's the bare essentials of branding and most people miss those essentials," Gross says.

He continues, "What independents tend to do, when they're thinking about branding, is to call a graphic designer. That's backward. The first thing to work is: What do you want the customer to think? Then, work on what I have to see in order to think it."

You want to get yourself known as an expert, and someone who goes that extra mile, Sideman says. "Service, delivery, friendliness, a personal touch - I don't think you can underrate those."

You may already be doing many of these things to brand your store but haven't yet wrapped everything into a single concept.

Branding Imperative: Let's Get Noticed

Branding sets your business apart; it's about standing out and getting noticed. You want to differentiate yourself from the competition, show what is unique about you and why customers should come to your store.

"You want to be memorable to current customers and prospective customers. You want to set a consistent look and a consistent way that you describe yourself," Mettler says.

Unparalleled service or uncompromising quality in what you do are two of the brand statements that your company really wants to make, Stiff adds.

"People are shopping for something much more than the product, especially when it's their wedding. It's the whole experience," he says. They want to associate with the brand that promises nothing will go wrong, the dress will fit perfectly, I'll look the best I've ever looked and I'm confident because the bridal shop I'm working with says they'll have it done in time."

A brand is a shortcut; it tells your story in shorthand. When you say 'McDonald's', a whole lot of information gets filled in automatically. If McDonald's comes out with a new sandwich called a McRib you already know something about that product: where it will be served, how it will be served, the range in which it will be priced, and the fact that it will taste the same no matter which location you buy it in.

Small companies can get their brands going by understanding how they portray themselves to the marketplace and then teaching their people, "This is what we're all about," Stiff says.

Branding can help you define the right audience. Branding can help you define your niche: who is your target customer, and what is this customer's wants, needs and lifestyle?

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"Don't waste your time trying to market to the two percent who might come in. Focus on the 98 percent who would be more interested in your product. If you don't have a specialty, find one," Mettler says. "There are so many bridal shops out there that if you don't bring something unique to the table, you'll be lost."

The good news for a bridal shop or formal wear shop is that they are usually pretty close to their customers, Stiff says. "They know them on a first-name basis. Generations of families have bought their formalwear or rented their tuxes at that particular venue."

A good brand leads to cohesive marketing. Branding forces your business to be consistent in the message it delivers, and that consistent message leads to action on the part of the consumer.

Your brand becomes a known quantity that comes with the perception of who you are, what you sell, what services you offer and how you treat your customers. Your name, logo and slogan cue a series of perceptions and expectations.

"A good brand leverages your marketing," Gross says. "It's your story, your history. You won't have to retell your story in every ad. If you have a good brand and have a sale, you can talk about the sale and the brand is doing the rest. But if you are an unknown, you have to talk about who you are, where you are, why you are, and, oh, by the way, you've got. . ."

Branding can create positive word of mouth. When you create a brand, bring customers into the store, and then deliver on your promise, those customers are going to be more likely to spread the word.

"Branding will make your business more memorable, and it will be more likely shoppers will tell their friends that your store is great," Mettler says.

Employees Drawn To Branded Business

Branding enhances employee recruiting and retention. People like being a part of a brand because it reinforces the idea that they belong to something bigger than themselves.

"People like to work for successful companies, for stores where they feel a part of a community with a single goal. When you work for a brand, it's easy to talk about it because you're proud of it, especially if it's based on examples of exemplary service," Barlow says.

If you have a consistent brand, your training is focused on supporting it. Having a clear message about who you are, what your promise is and what you do is the framework for initial and ongoing training.

Branding is also a sales job, Stiff says. Teach your staff: This is what exceptional service looks like. In this situation, we do this. The bride who rushes into the store at 4:55 p.m. when the store closes at 5 p.m. shouldn't be greeted with, "sorry, we close in five minutes." Instead, the salesperson should ask, "What can we do for you right now and can we set up an appointment?"

Salespeople should be the biggest walking billboards for your brand.

"They should epitomize whatever it is the company wants to say is the reason to pay a little bit more for the value you get," Stiff advises. When you build a brand culture everyone in the store is delivering the same message every day.

Effective branding allows you to create an image and maintain it. You present a consistent face to the world. Everything you do should build, maintain and enhance your brand. It can only enhance the store's image to have every aspect of the business delivering the same message.

Your brand can enhance networking and business connections, as other businesses relate to you based on your store's image and reputation. Branding can mean clout both within the local business community and in dealing with vendors and suppliers.

Branding is profitable. Successful branding - delivering on the promise - means that customers are drawn to your store.

"If you start with the brand - that you are going to provide a great shopping experience and take care of them every stop of the way - price becomes a less important consideration," Stiff explains.

Can branding ever be bad for your store? Yes, in three circumstances: if you don't start

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with a clear idea of what your brand is, if you brand yourself improperly or if you make promises you can't keep.

However, when branding is done right, it is a unifying force for your store. It demands a definition of who you are, who you want to be and who your customer is. Providing these things will help brides make the most of their shopping experience.

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