

Branding Part 2

Your Unique Brand

Start with a vision, create an image, stay focused!

By Allison Deerr

Editor's note: This is the second article in a two-part series discussing the importance of developing a distinguishable store brand. The first story ("It's All About Branding", pg. 44), offered an in-depth discussion of what branding is and why it's valuable, while this article explains in detail the best way to discover and develop your brand.

Brands are a part of our everyday lives. We're constantly bombarded with messages from radio, television, the Internet and print publications. We as consumers have an emotional connection to brands and the promises they make about how certain goods, services and experiences will impact our lifestyles.

But how should you as a bridal retailer go about branding your store? Branding is a process and it should be done painstakingly carefully to assure you're delivering the appropriate message and creating the image you want to project.

First, you have to have a vision, says T. Scott Gross, the Kerrville, Tex.-based author of "Outrageous Customer Service" (Dearborn, 2004).

"The big question is what should your brand be? What's the purpose of my store? What's it going to look like when it's complete? What position do I want to own?" Gross asks. "The neat thing about it is this: If nobody has taken a particular position in your market - say the most elegant store in town - then you can claim it. But then you have to live up to it."

A brand is like real estate that you own in the mind of the consumer, Gross explains.

"Positioning is what real estate you own. In retail terms, you have Wal-Mart, and their position is low prices and you have Target, fashion at a value. When K-Mart tried to make a comeback the only position left for them was cheap, bringing back the Blue Light Special," he says.

"I would start by internally identifying the top things that represent my company," says Dan Stiff, the Baltimore-based author of "Sell The Brand First: How to Sell Your Brand and Create Lasting Customer Loyalty" (McGraw-Hill, 2006). "Don't just say 'service.' Everyone expects service. What is it that's emotional about your service that makes it better, exceptional, world class? Spend some time identifying what differentiates you from other companies that do what you do."

"What are you know for in the marketplace? What would people say would be missing if your company were to go out of business? What are you doing that you want to keep doing? What would you like to do that you aren't doing?"

You also need to think in terms of brand equity and brand liability, as well as the accumulation of good impressions versus bad impressions, Gross says. If you've been in the market for awhile and people know you, you can go to the customer and say, "You're changing and so are we."

"An example: Federal Express used to be "When it Absolutely, Positively Has to Be There Overnight. FedEx." Then customers said they wanted packages to get to Hong Kong overnight. So, FedEx came up with the slogan: The World. On Time," he says.

Steps You Need to Take to Create a Brand

Identify Your Niche and Your Customer. Take an imaginary customer through the experience of shopping in your store. When they walk in the door and look around, what is the brand experience you want them to have?

This can encompass décor, traffic flow, lighting, music, color scheme, display systems or how they're greeted.

Brand positions can also be less tangible. For example, "We will give you honest feedback on your gown to make sure you choose a gown that is flattering to your body and fits your personality."

Branding Part 2

A good example of branded service is Coldwater Creek. When you are in the dressing rooms you are in the "queen zone." They tell customers, "When you are back here, we are at your beck and call. If you want something else in a different size or different color, just say so. We'll go get it."

Put it in Writing. Go back to your business plan's mission statement as a starting point and refine that based on how your business goals and objectives have changed. It's important that you clearly define the brand within reasonable parameters. You don't want to brand yourself as a high-end store, then the next year offer a drastically different price range. Make a decision and stay with it.

Analyze your Business. Experts advise: Take off the blinders and look at your store, warts and all. Ask for frank comments about what customers really think about the experience of shopping in your store. Business owners often are surprised about how far off the mark they are.

"Owners and manager who've worked in a store for a long time can be too close to see what's unique and different," says Lyn Mettler of Mettler Public Relations in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., who also does "Brand Bandits" Podcast on www.brandbandits.blogspot.com. "That's where sometimes it can be good to bring someone in from the outside, with fresh eyes and no established opinions. They can tell you this is unique. This would be a good thing to highlight. This is something to avoid."

Host an Informal Focus Group, Mettler suggests. Invite brides who are already married and have been through the process with you to share their feelings about the experience. This can be eye-opening.

Examine Every Aspect of Your Store, Including Customer Service. Make a list of every detail and decide if it's working to enhance your brand. Include everything from your signage and Web site to your dress codes and how shoppers are greeted.

Research the Competition. How do they brand themselves? How do they operate? What services do they offer? What do they promise and how do they follow through? How does what they do differ from what you offer? What do they do wrong that you want to avoid at all costs? Have they sewn up the niche you covet or have they fumbled the ball and left the field wide open?

Study Retail and Service Businesses Beyond Bridal. You can glean good ideas about everything from window displays and staff attire to store décor and store security by visiting other businesses. Ask yourself: What about a sales or service experience worked for you? Ask your staff the same question.

Determine How to Deliver the Brand. This is where you need to set the parameters of what you'll do within your brand. How far will you go to deliver your brand of service? This checklist should include everything from keeping the store immaculate and having a uniform dress code to greeting every bride by name.

Ask for Customer Feedback. If you ask, "Did they offer you tea?" that cup of tea is no longer something special you did just for them. Ask instead, "What did you enjoy about the shopping experience?" This doesn't narrow their comments and increases the chances you'll get honest feedback.

Involve the Staff. Every employee must become a part of the brand culture.

"It's important to get everybody on board, educate them on what the message is, get them enthusiastic about it, keep them involved and excited," Mettler says. "Do all of the branding you want, if your employees can't deliver the service on the floor, it's all for naught."

Make the Brand Real for Your Employees, Stiff says. Give examples, encourage sharing. Your employees personify the brand, so everyone who works in the store must be delivering the same message. The one who doesn't may be the one the customer remembers.

Store personnel need to sit down and discuss stories of exceptional customer service. Rather than what did we do wrong, ask what did we do right?

It's easiest to deliver brand when everything goes smoothly, the store isn't too crowded and dresses arrive on time, Stiff says. The real test of commitment to brand is how your store performs when problems arise. Training has to be ongoing to maintain and build on the brand and incorporate new things into the culture.

Branding Part 2

"It also helps keep things fresh and keeps you ahead of the curve. If you're doing something right, you will be copied," he says.

What you may find is that staff becomes competitive in finding new and different ways to provide branded customer service, says Janelle Barlow, the Las Vegas-based author of "Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge" (Berrett-Koehler, 2004).

"Enthusiasm can be contagious. Employees can learn from each other," she says.

This doesn't mean you should script your sales presentations, Barlow says. Individuality is an asset in bridal sales. But ensure the framework is there. For example, every consultant greets the bride by name, mentions wedding details, offers a cup of tea or a glass of champagne, follows up with thank you notes, phone calls or e-mails and updates brides on a regular basis.

Create Your Brand Graphics and Taglines. Because so many images are flashed before our eyes every day, it's only through repetition that we register them.

"So whether you do color or black and white, just the name, a logo, or a tagline, make it consistent," Barlow says.

"Consistency is the key in branding, both visually and verbally," Mettler agrees. Carry the same one or two type fonts and the same color scheme throughout all media and strive for a professional look.

Branding isn't just about your visual look, it's about the words, Mettler adds. You want to make sure you're delivering the same message about your store in every ad, news release, on your Web site, etc.

Experiment with taglines that summarize as an umbrella concept everything that you stand for.

"You want a line that is evocative, that engages a person to think about that special day for themselves," Barlow says.

Your slogan in four to six words should define your position in a memorable way, Mettler says.

A good exercise is to spend time scanning TV commercials, newspapers, magazines or the Internet for business logos and slogans. Assess how the slogan or logo defines the company position and how well the company delivers on that brand promise.

Every press release should include that boilerplate paragraph that drives home your brand components: exclusive selection, convenient store hours, personal shaping experience and professional alterations.

Tune in Your Advertising

Examine your existing marketing plan. Does the way you spend your ad dollars today support your brand?

An interesting question to ask is: if money were no object, what would I do?

"In this way the business defines a gold standard for themselves," Barlow says. "Then they can look realistically at where they should invest their money. What would my advertising, packaging or window displays look like?"

Bridal stores should make sure the majority of their marketing is geared toward getting brides to come to the store, Gross asserts.

"It always should involve the product - trying it on, seeing it modeled and talking about it," Mettler says.

All of your advertising should be previewed by staff before delivery to potential customers.

"Nothing sabotages a good promotion quicker than staffs that are ignorant of the details of the event or message," Barlow warns.

Branding FAQ

Branding Part 2

1. How much does creating a brand cost? Little or nothing. However, if you're going to spend money, dollars may be best spent getting professional graphics, logo and artwork.
2. How long does it take? Branding is an ongoing process. Doing the groundwork to define your brand, creating "brand culture" in your store, training personnel in the brand and developing marketing and advertising strategies take time. Many bridal shops already possess the components of a viable brand. They just haven't thought of the brand in a cohesive way.
3. How do you avoid copying another store's brand? Check out that name or slogan; You can simply Google it on the Internet. You obviously don't want to duplicate anything that is trademarked or copyrighted. You don't want a phrase that is used by dozens of other businesses. You also don't want one that doesn't reflect your brand and could equally apply to a restaurant or a hardware store. You can go through the legal steps to protect your logo or slogan, but experts say it usually isn't worth the cost for independent retailers.
4. What should you do if another store copies you? Keep changing what you do because the competition will copy you. An example: Look at recent ads for "family restaurants" where several offer a fixed-price three-course meal.
5. Are there any don'ts in creating a brand? Don't copy; be original. It's better to brand who you are than to try to duplicate what's worked for another business. Don't try to be all things to all people; define your niche. Don't think "logo" first. Designing a logo or creating a slogan or tagline should come after you've researched your market, defined your customer and identified your niche.

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