

Make Your Brand Speak for You

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Everywhere you look these days you see something about developing your brand. You know you need to pay attention to it. You know it's important. But in all the talk, have you figured out what it really is?

Here is our short definition: **Your brand is your reputation.**

Your brand is your most important corporate asset. A strong brand builds confidence and trust with your customers and distinguishes you from other organizations serving your client base.

But what exactly *is* it?

Your brand is the combination of your positioning and mission statements. It is the promise you make to your customers about the products and services you provide and how you are going to handle your customer relationships. The advertising firm Ogilvy Mather provides another good definition: **A brand is a promise made consistently over time.**

Everything you do and say as an organization supports your brand promise, from how quickly you respond to new requests to how you handle conflict. It is how you talk to your customers, how you present yourself in the market, and how you interact with each individual within your company.

The brand includes intangible elements such as how you speak to your clients and how you talk about your services.

It also includes tangible elements, including your logo and marketing materials. These tangible elements are called the **visual identity**, and they are the **easiest way for your clients to easily recognize your brand**. See a swoosh or some golden arches and you automatically think of Nike and McDonald's. Those symbols mean something to you, and those organizations have invested heavily to make sure it means something positive.

Showing and Telling the Brand Promise

Consistent visual messages form a positive and distinct image of your company in the mind of your audience. Therefore, maintaining a consistent use of your visual identity is critical to building your brand promise. Any deviation from the standard look and feel of your marketing and communications products results in a misrepresentation of your organization, your brand image, and your integrity.

Every day your company creates products that require the use of your visual identity—whether it's an update to the web site or an advertisement. So how do you make sure everything is consistent? The following steps are the critical components of a well-executed visual identity system. Follow these steps, and your visual identity will reflect your brand promise.

1. Develop a corporate logo that reflects your company's mission and goals.

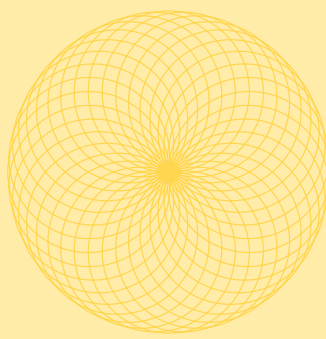
Your logo is the visual mark of your company. I cannot understate the importance of working with an

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experienced logo designer when developing your mark. You will use your logo for everything you produce—web sites, letterhead, billboards. It must work in each environment. A good logo has the following characteristics:

- **It is distinctive.** That means nobody else in your market space is using the same type of image in the same way. Think of how many global telecommunications companies use a globe—don't they all start to look the same after awhile?
 - **It works in a variety of formats.** That means your logo needs to look good whether it is blown up to fit on the side of a building or is very small to fit on the back of a program guide with fifty other logos. It needs to work in color, black and white, white reversed out. You may love the graphic of the eagle you've chosen, but if it won't work for every application, set it free.
 - **It makes sense.** That means people who see your logo need to be able to understand the message without a written explanation with it. If you are using a word mark logo, this is less of an issue—that's why so many companies with strong brands do not have an icon logo.
 - **It is simple.** That means you haven't tried to convey more than one concept with it. And you haven't used more than one dingbat or icon. If you have an icon, make the word mark simple. Too much going on in your logo will give your customers the impression you do not have a clear vision.
- **It is appropriate to your business.** Your logo is about your mission, values, and competitive advantage. It is not about something you like just because. Your daughter may be adorable, but using her likeness in your identity is probably not appropriate if you have a technology-consulting firm.

2. Always Use the Logo Consistently

Your logo is intended to be the visual representation of your company's mission and values. Since your logo is the primary visual identifier of your brand in every communication, whether print or electronic, it is imperative that you use it consistently throughout all media. How you do this will depend on your particular mark. The best advice is to have your logo designer develop a standards and usage guide. These guides include information about how much white space needs to surround the logo, the optimal size of the logo in different kinds of uses, how to use the color, black and white, or reversed versions of it, and other things that will ensure you use it consistently.

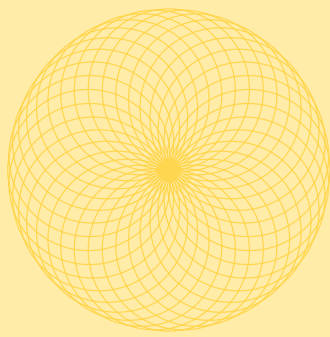
If you do nothing else toward using the logo consistently, follow this advice: **never, under any circumstances, alter the logo.** Do not use a small portion of it, change the colors, stretch it out, or use it as wall paper or other graphic element. Altering your logo in any way dilutes your brand and diminishes the value of your mark. Don't do it.

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3. Corporate Fonts

Like your logo, your corporate typeface creates a consistent message. You should choose your corporate font as carefully as you select your company name and logo. Then you should use this font in every communication. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as substitute fonts for web sites or multimedia. But the exceptions should be just that...exceptions. This is one area where many small companies fall down. They use their logo consistently, but change the font every time they do a different marketing piece. The result is materials that look like they come from different companies.

4. Use a Consistent Color Pallet

Developing a color pallet that communicates your message will support your brand. Would you buy an insurance product if the agent's business card were bright pink? Probably not. The colors you use need to compliment your mission and values. For example, if you want to convey a professional, competent feel, then earth tones are a good choice.

5. Use a Grid for all Publications

Using a grid may seem like an odd thing to say is vital to support the brand. But it is important because a grid acts as the foundation for good design. If used well, a grid will automatically provide a more professional feel to your products.

Using a consistent grid for series products, like newsletters and pamphlets, is vital for consistency. The grid not only

helps align graphic elements, it dictates where heads, text graphics, and the logo are placed. Like the consistent use of the logo and corporate fonts, the grid will help orient your audience, lessening any confusion they may have. Using a grid will make your message stronger.

A word of advice: if your designer doesn't know what a grid is or how to use one, get yourself a new designer.

6. Remember the Goal of the Product

Regardless of what you are producing, the end goal is to communicate a particular message to your audience. Consistency in your visual identity will help your audience absorb the message you need them to hear.

- Always design the piece to communicate with the widest segment of your target audience.
- Make sure the artwork selected supports the written message.
- Make sure the product is, above all, easy to read.

If you follow all of the above advice, you will be well on your way to establishing a strong visual identity that supports your brand promise. And that a strong brand promise will help increase your customer's loyalty.

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