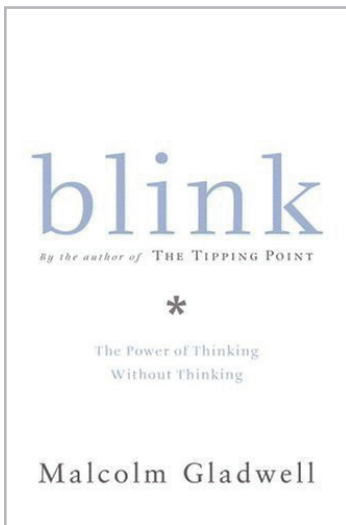


BUILDING YOUR BRAND IMAGE

White Paper



Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* asserts that customers make most buying decisions (and the best choices) by relying on their two-second first impressions rather than a long, drawn-out process involving lots of rational yet extraneous information. Buyers make split-second decisions based on stored memories, images and feelings—which is what a brand is all about. A strong brand equals a strong two-second impression, no matter what you're selling.

Think about the innovation of Apple or the hip friendliness of Starbucks. All you need to see is their logo or storefront and a clear picture of that company and what it stands for quickly comes to mind.

But this is not just important for those huge consumer companies. A brand is probably small businesses' most valuable asset. Whether you are selling to consumers or businesses, a brand image is critical. And it doesn't require a huge financial commitment – just a diligence across everything you do. And a little creativity.

This paper concentrates on establishing your brand image among your target audiences and assumes your company already has a brand. But, if you don't, keep these three things in mind while you're creating it:

- **Know your target market inside and out and create brand elements for them** – not your industry peers
- **Be consistent** – create a look, a message, a way of doing business and stick to it – carry it through to new initiatives
- **Be true to yourself** – much of how the world experiences your brand is through you and your people – know that there is a chunk of the market that wants who you are and doesn't need you to try to be something else

USE YOUR WEB SITE TO BUILD YOUR BRAND

One of the best ways to establish a brand is through your web site. Whether you've had one for a while or are just building it now, step back and ask yourself if it truly reflects what you want the company to portray in the market.

- Is your messaging clear and concise or would customers leave feeling confused?
- Does your brand image come through – is it high tech? warm and fuzzy?
- Are the colors reflective of your brand and logo?

If not, it's time to make some changes. And while you're at it, make sure you've incorporated the latest social media tools. This gives you open lines of communication with your customers and provides a reason for them to keep coming back.

Web sites offer the opportunity for you to engage in conversations with your existing and potential customers, whether creating or contributing to blogs, visiting forums to add your two cents' worth, or posting your company's latest news on social networking or association sites. Where appropriate, set up a portion of your site for blogs and customer feedback.

This area is where you can really show your brand personality. If you're a massage therapist, you can post health and wellness tips. If you're a restaurant, you can list new menu items and ask for feedback and ideas.

Engaging this "conversation" gives you an opportunity to continually refine your brand and how you present it. It's important to pay close attention to the feedback and adapt your messaging and marketing to maximize the site's effectiveness. If customers are abandoning your site within seconds of arriving, look into what adjustments you can make to engage them. And if no one is posting feedback, look for reasons to get them engaged.

MARKET YOUR SITE

Once you are confident that the site is working for you, it's time to get it out to prospective customers. Position yourself in places where your prospective buyers are going, including association newsrooms and community forums, trade magazine sites, RSS feeds, industry-related blogs – anything that speaks to your intended demographic. Look into buying ad space on these sites, post commentary with a link to your site, or propose sharing links to drive similar prospects to complimentary sites.

For example, the local real estate agent may include a link to the title company and vice versa. Or the flower shop can advertise on the "romantic" restaurants sites. There are a lot of ways to get creative and get your name and brand visible.

In addition, services such as Google AdWords have become a powerful and effective marketing tool for small business owners. The key to getting the most out of services such as AdWords include taking the following steps:

- Knowing the right audience for your products and services
- Structuring each campaign based on a simple goal, such as a product category, product line or theme
- Choosing powerful keywords that resonate with your target audience
- Including a strong call to action to draw people to your site
- Targeting individual campaigns according to a specific audience and/or geographic region
- Continually reviewing your online advertising and making changes when needed



A brand is a living entity – and it is enriched or undermined cumulatively over time, the product of a thousand small gestures”

– Michael Eisner, CEO Disney

There are many free and low-cost tools that can help you to drive traffic to your site and generate sales – from sponsored links and search marketing services to setting up pages on social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

Also, don't be afraid to take advantage of multimedia opportunities to extend your marketing reach. The potential for reuse of content at almost no cost is very high. If you are presenting at a trade show for example, why not record your presentation and digitize it for redistribution? Podcasts can be very simple and effective marketing tools.



COMCAST BUSINESS CLASS' CUSTOMER TOUCH POINTS

Make sure your company name, logo, company colors, tag lines and other clearly identifying items are evident wherever you touch a customer. It's a simple way to reinforce your brand. Consider:

- Caller ID – especially important for home businesses. Make sure you have a business line established that is identified with your company name, not your last name.
- 800-numbers – if you can use your name or an important brand attribute in the number, it's easier for your customers to remember and reinforces your brand image with them every time they call.
- Web site URL – Again, use your company name if you can. You want your customers to find you easily.
- Yellow Pages listing – Include your logo, web site address and a tag line if you have one.
- Business cards and stationary – Make sure everyone in your company has the same cards and uses the corporate letterhead.

EXPLORE OTHER AVENUES TO ESTABLISH YOUR BRAND

Beyond the marketing of your web site, there are a number of ways to establish your brand image. You may be doing many of these now. Focusing on a mix of marketing strategies will spread your name quicker and more effectively than simply doing one thing. But again, it's important to be consistent throughout all of these efforts. Same messaging, same image, same "voice".

- Public Relations – Get to know your local or trade reporters. Share important company milestones or news with them so you get coverage in the newspaper or trade publication. Submit an op-ed or letter to the editor if you have a strong, compelling opinion on something in your industry. Issue search engine optimized (SEO) company news through services like PRWeb (www.prweb.com) that will drive people to your site.

PR provides terrific potential "third-party" coverage that can help to position your company, products and services in a way that can have a great impact on your target audience. Reading a review of your hair salon in the local paper carries much more weight than a paid advertisement.

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- Events and Trade Shows – Make sure your booth, booth graphics, hand-outs and even booth uniforms clearly portray your brand image. Carry your colors, logos and taglines through everything.
 - Sponsorships – Identify possible events and organizations that you can sponsor in order to gain face-to-face visibility with your customers and prospects. Many speaking opportunities come along with a trade show sponsorship package, for instance. It may really be worth that investment if it puts you in front of the right people.

While it takes a lot of energy to create and build a brand, it will pay off throughout the life of your business. It's hard to measure the exact value a brand brings, but we all know how it impacts our purchase decisions. Now's the time to make it work for your business.