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Revamp Your Business Image with Branding and Marketing

Experts offer advice on how to develop, shape and promote your business as a brand in the modern marketplace

By Jenny S. Rebholz

What do I want to be when I grow up? I think "interior designer" was an easy answer for many of us, but what about principal, business owner or entrepreneur? While drafting, space planning, color theory, textiles and the history of decorative arts were course requirements and are necessities for producing skilled designers, many of us have made our way into the business world without even a basic business course. No matter if you are a designer in a large firm or small business owner, business decisions are part of our daily lives. We not only support the growth and development of clients, but more importantly we have to find ways to support the growth and development of the company we work for or the business we own.

Branding and marketing play a key role in our business development efforts, but do we know where to start and the best approach to take? Expert advice on how to strategically think about your business and its future will make you question the current state of your firm and how to implement best practices that will lead to measurable success.

What Comes First?

What comes first, the chicken or the egg? How do you brand a company and market your services? In order to contemplate a

plan of action, you need to first understand the nature of your business and what products or services make you most profitable.

"If designers are not clear on their profit pools, then they are just as likely to brand the wrong services," comments David Shepherd, President and CEO of Designing Profits, Inc. "It is tempting to think that branding and marketing are the solutions to business finances, but branding first can be like the tail wagging the dog."

Shepherd has created an entire conference dedicated to helping designers become better businesspeople. He believes that for designers to build a profitable business, they must first be clear on their vision for the business. "Branding and marketing are pieces of the whole. You need a vision of the whole before you can decide what you want to do first."

Ron McDaniel is the author of Buzzoodle Buzz Marketing and an expert on how to create buzz and visibility; he, too, emphasizes the importance of understanding your goals before deciding on what tactics to invest in.

Committing to the Investment

A better understanding of how you make money and getting a handle on your entire business, will provide a broader picture





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that will allow you to determine how much you can invest on your strategic marketing efforts.

Just as you need to take the time to understand your business, you need to be thorough and strategic in your approach to marketing. Design businesses have a tendency to adjust their marketing efforts based on income and work load. While many companies find marketing the first place to cut budgets or a great place to spend money when business is good, this is not considered the most effective mentality for a strategic marketing effort. And regardless of how business owners approach marketing, they are sure to expect quick and easily identifiable results. Well, the bad news is this is not the reality of branding and marketing. Reaping the rewards of your marketing efforts may take time and repetition to achieve success. Companies need to commit both time and money to this effort.

"It is hard to measure the success of these tools and your marketing efforts in the short term," comments Shepherd. "A big mistake, no matter what you implement, is to under-fund it and

"As a business owner, you are your brand. Everything you do and say is a brand." — Phyllis Harbinger, ASID, CID of Design Concepts/Interiors LLC

do it for too short of a timeframe." The best approach is to select tactics that are part of an overall strategic plan or campaign.

Establishing a budget for marketing is part of the strategic approach. "Don't nickel and dime it," advises Shepherd. "Get a budget in place for six months, be dedicated to branding and marketing, and take the financial hit." Shepherd finds that, depending on the growth of a business, it is not uncommon for marketing to be 8-14 percent of total sales. "It will differ with each firm, but that is not an unreasonable amount."

Local interior designer Phyllis Harbinger, ASID, CID of Design Concepts/Interiors LLC agrees, "You need to keep marketing

efforts ongoing. You can't have a mentality of 'I don't have money, so I won't spend money.' You need to have funds in place dedicated to marketing, and then it is a matter of deciding what the best marketing approach is for your business."

What's in a Brand?

In order to continue down a successful marketing path, it is important to understand your brand. This is a word or concept that can sometimes be mysterious or confusing, but it is a key component to your marketing efforts. So what is a brand?

According to McDaniel, "Your brand is who you are, and you live it."

Harbinger agrees, "As a business owner, you are your brand. Everything you do and say is a brand."

The secret to branding is creating a focal point. According to Bill Schley, President and Chief Creative Officer of david, ID, a brand consulting firm in Connecticut, and co-author of *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the Lost Art of the Big Idea*, "You need to create a specialty, something that differentiates you from the competition. You need to define and develop your dominant selling idea, and once you create that distinction, you have to live up to it."

Identifying your dominate selling point and then communicating it as simply as possible so the public can grasp it and easily repeat it to others is just the start. You then need to follow up what you say with consistent, reliable actions.

"You have to be consistent over time, and when you make a promise, you have to live up to it and deliver. You have to align what you do with what you say you do," adds Schley. "Branding is not optional. It is something everyone has, and if you don't shape it, someone else will. You don't decide to have a brand, you just shape it. It is 95 percent what you do and 5 percent what you say; it is all about performance."

Marketing That Makes Sense for You

Now that you know what you stand for, it is time to spread the word—create a buzz. Once again, some careful and strategic thinking is required to select marketing tools that make sense for you. You need to evaluate your goals so that you can select multiple methods, a campaign or plan, that will help you achieve those goals. This will provide the measurable results

you have been looking for to help evaluate your return on investment.

"You have to determine the outcome you want from the start and then work backwards from there. Instead of just picking a tool to try, you have to say, 'What's the best outcome for me?' and then choose the best tools to achieve the goal and produce the outcome," describes McDaniel. "The more specific the outcome, the better to hold people accountable, and the more you will get out of the money you spend."

From brochures, postcard campaigns and show houses to press releases and article- and book-writing, many designers continue to use more traditional marketing methods. In fact, Shepherd challenges your basic Sales 101 skills and asks you to think about the last time you called a previous client? In a business that is known for repeat clients and referrals, this is an inexpensive way to re-connect with happy clients and seek new business.

With advancements in technology, a whole new world of marketing tools is available, such as websites, blogs, online magazines and e-newsletters. Do you

Learning from Designers

Phyllis Harbinger, ASID, CID

Designers like Phyllis Harbinger have invested time and money to learn more about marketing by attending Designing Profits conferences, enrolling in networking groups and consulting marketing experts. This marketing education has led her to start her own blog and to start writing a book. In an effort to increase her exposure on the internet, she has found ways to be included on manufacturer's websites and is working with vendors to try and launch advertising on her own blog.

The goal is to continuously find ways to improve your presence on the internet and provide links and information that lead back to your business. "The blog opens my business to a whole universe of awareness," comments Harbinger.

In addition to the blog, she is re-vamping her website in order to take things to another level and grow her business in a new way. She understands that you have mere seconds to grab someone's attention on a website and is going to adjust her web design to address this.

While she is embracing the technology, she also embraces more traditional formats. "My business cards are like a mini portfolio. We have a very visual business, so I offer project photos on my card as well as a list of services." She also conducts a postcard campaign, participates in the Architectural Digest Home Show and is thinking about creating a company brochure.



ever Google yourself to see what kind of web presence you have...or don't have?

For those evaluating the World Wide Web, you need to understand your market and the impact of your Web pres-

ence. Beyond simply having a Web site, McDaniel believes you need to make sure your Web site is converting clients and creating leads for you. This means you have to make sure your Web site is truly leading



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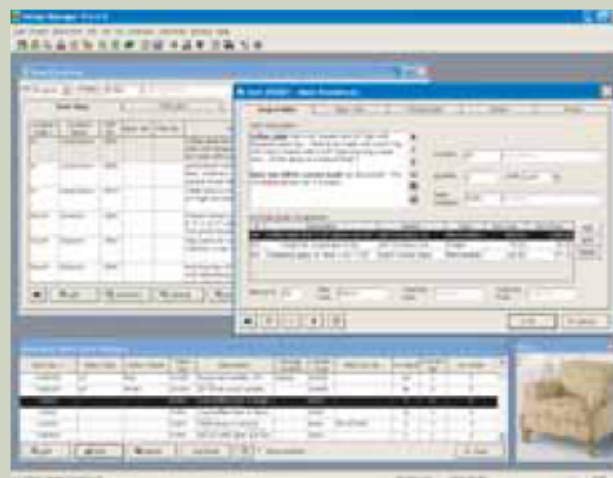
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