

Image and Branding

It's time for small business to think big when it comes to image and branding

You know, five years ago you never used to hear the words image, brand and small business in the same sentence. That was because it was assumed that to have a brand you had to be a multi-national and branding was driven by mega amounts of advertising. We now know that is not true, in fact every small business has a brand whether they want it or not!

Now let me explain what a brand is because no one ever tells you. Forget all the technical definitions a brand is simply the values that your clients or customers attach to you image. This means when they see your logo, pass your shop or receive an email from you they get a "gut response". For instance I have a wonderful fruit and vegetable shop near me owned by a young Italian couple called Angelo and Maria. Angelo is passionate about fresh produce; he can talk for hours about the first of the white asparagus or a supplier of back figs. When I was in there the other day I took some tomatoes up to the counter and he asked me what they were for when I said a pasta sauce he shook his head and disappeared (with the tomatoes) out the back of the shop returning with over ripe roma tomatoes which were perfect for a pasta sauce. He also has two young sons who often help out in the shop after school when I was there the other day they were taking the outlet leaves off cabbages and learning the difference between the smell of basil and coriander. And Maria, she makes the best Tiramisu on the planet they can't keep stocks of it in the chiller cabinet. So what values have I attached to their image, product knowledge, passion and family. In fact, I am always a little surprised when I don't get the continental kiss on each cheek when I go there.

So think about what "brand" your clients have given you. Be careful it's not "that grumpy guy who never smiles" or the hairdresser "who's always running late". Think about what values you would like to have associated with your business and then start to build them into your marketing and customer service activities.

It's also a good idea to do a simple image audit on your business. This isn't as difficult as it sounds and can be very enlightening. Collect everything that carries your logo or business image. Letterhead, business cards, promotional flyers, photos of signage, snapshots of web pages, emails etc. Lay them out on a table or flat surface, step back and look at them through slightly unfocused eyes imagining you'd never seen this stuff before. Then ask yourself ... "How many businesses are represented there?" If the answer is more than one you have an image problem. And the cause of most image problems is business owners.

We tend to fiddle with our image and logos because we are bored but the end result is mixed messages for the client. You may have started your business with conservative, corporate image using navy and cream as the colours, and then things got a bit tight so you produced a lot of sales flyers in fluoro colours and then you had a new website designed by a hip young designer who created a great palette of green and purple. Imagine what all that is saying to your customer.....confusion reigns supreme!

Some of the things to look for include:

- How many businesses are represented?
- Am I presenting more than one image?
- Am I giving mixed messages?
- What values have I attached to my brand?
- Does my image reflect where I have been or where I am heading?
- Logos used in non standard ways
- Inconsistent paper colours/quality
- Different names on different material
- A radically different website
- Inconsistent use of fonts
- Style of language and phrases
- Positioning statements, USP's and benefits

Look at all the material on the table and decide what needs to change to boost your brand values. Remember that image and branding is all about perception. What people see is what they think they are going to get!