



## The B2B of branding

by Debra Blundell.

Think of a brand. Any brand. Now tell me what you thought of. Was it Coca-Cola? Or MacDonalds? Nike maybe, or Vodafone? Whatever it was, I bet it was a consumer brand. Branding and consumer marketing go hand in hand these days. Even the little guys – Innocent drinks springs to mind – use clever branding to get known and get big.

But when it comes to the business-to-business market, branding isn't necessarily seen as vital to success, particularly at the smaller end of the scale. Business buyers are perceived as being rational beings, who would never be swayed because they like the colour orange or think the adverts are clever. Business buyers, the wisdom goes, make decisions purely on price and performance. Wrong. Branding is as important for businesses and services as it is in consumer markets. Business buyers may be looking for a different set of brand values from consumers – primarily, they want to know what a product or service can do for their business – but everyone feels more confident buying from a reputable company. And branding builds reputations.

So, if you don't have the marketing budget of Apple or Microsoft, how do you go about building your business brand? Firstly, you have to identify your brand attributes. This is harder than it sounds: it's much easier to say what makes one car better than another than it is to pinpoint the differences

between two courier companies. The list below will help you get started in identifying the key attributes of your brand. There may be recognise strengths that you didn't think to shout about. How do your strengths measure up against your competitors? There may be some critical differences you can play on. You'll probably spot some weakness too (nobody's perfect). Work on them and make sure you let customers know through your communications that you're trying to improve – everyone loves a trier.

No-one can communicate all their attributes. That would just be confusing! What's important is to communicate the right ones – not the ones that you feel are important but the ones your customers rate the highest. Do some research. Ask customers what they feel is important and then ask yourself how you measure up. In technology markets, quality of support and commitment to product development might rank higher than price and delivery. In commodity markets, support and information can give you the edge when there is little real difference between products.

Just because we're talking business, it doesn't all need to be factual – business buyers have feelings too, so don't neglect the soft issues.

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'Hard' attributes like quality, performance and price will always be important but, to an extent, people take these for granted. If you want to stand out in a crowded market, you need to up the warm, fuzzy factor by focusing on soft attributes like customer service or technical support.

Once you've pinned down your brand attributes, make sure you let your customers know about them – at every opportunity. That doesn't just mean telling them how great your products are. Even small B2Bs need to look at the bigger picture. Product branding will increase sales in the short term but corporate branding will build your reputation – and that's the foundation for long-term success. Keep a balance in your communications between marketing your products and your company brand. Be consistent. Make sure your branding messages run through everything you do: visual identity; tone of voice; behaviour (the way you answer the phone tells customers a lot about you). Make sure you get those messages out there at every opportunity: on corporate literature, on websites, on advertising, on stationery, on business cards... Above all, stick with it. Great brands aren't built overnight, even in the consumer market.

## Brand values for businesses

### Fitness for purpose

How well do you (or your products) do the job? Do you conform to industry standards or have any recognised industry accreditations?

### Value for money and quality

This doesn't necessarily mean cheap! It's about getting maximum value for the price. Proven quality provides enormous stand-out.

### Reliability

Not just reliable products but solid financial performance, a strong management team and a good industrial relations record.

### Proven products

Business buyers tend to be more cautious than consumers – they need proof that something works and has been thoroughly tested before it reaches the market.

### Product development

Look ahead – tell customers what you are doing to continuously improve what they're buying now.

### Distribution and delivery

Availability – often in bulk or in a hurry – can be crucial to business customers.

### Finance

Many businesses look for ways to spread payments: attractive interest rates and good payment terms can give you an edge.

### Service backup

Loss of a critical process can bring a business to its knees. Businesses that offer genuinely great service should shout about it!

### Training

Training keeps customers happy and helps them get the most out of their investment.

### Customised products

If you are able to offer products tailored to fit business customers' specific needs, you'll have a higher perceived value.

### Partnership

Good business is all about good relationships – and not just in the service industries. The ability to work on joint development projects or provide a support package throughout the lifetime of a service is a real selling point.

### Customer service

Service includes everything from error-free administration to the way you handle phone enquiries to after-sales care. Many businesses rank customer service way above price.

### Consulting

Sound advice – before, during and after a sale – is the basis for many lasting and fruitful business relationships.

### Technical support

Like customer service, the quality and speed of your support ranks very highly with business buyers.

### Environmental issues

More and more customers are looking for environmentally-responsible suppliers – particularly in the public sector where it may be mandatory.

### Ordering and product information

If your information – in print, online and in person – is clear and informative and the ordering process is simple and efficient, you'll win many friends.

### Customer base

Buyers need reassurance: if you have a great blue chip client list, tell them about it.

To find out how you can strengthen your business branding, contact Gilles Guilbert on [gg@indigocreative.co.uk](mailto:gg@indigocreative.co.uk)