

Follow this recipe to build your brand and grow your business

If you own a business, you have a brand.

A brand is all of the images people conjure up when coming into contact with your business' name. Let's say you own a restaurant. Every time a customer walks through your door and enjoys a meal, drives by and sees your signage, or hears your ad on the radio, your brand image is being formed.

Why should you care? Because whether you're a global brand like McDonald's, or the local pizza place, your brand is critically important. It defines who you are and what your business stands for. It sets you apart from the competition. It attracts and helps you retain staff. And, it can propel business growth by helping you connect with customers and potential customers that hold the highest potential.

So even if you're not thinking critically about your brand, you already have one. The opportunity is to shape and mold your brand to reflect what you want your business to stand for — or risk being branded by default. The more you take control of what you want people to think about your business, the higher the potential for success.

Take a good hard look at your business and at what's important to you as a business owner. What are the truths about what your business has to offer? Be honest with yourself — the truer your assessment, the truer your brand. You can't be something you're not.

First up? Zero in on the audience that holds the highest potential for growth. If you're running an upscale French eatery, you're going to attract a certain type of clientele — folks with the means to afford your prices, folks with an affinity for French food or adventurous palates, folks looking to celebrate a special occasion.

Equally important is to understand who your audience is not. Just because someone happens to live in close proximity to your restaurant and dines out frequently does not necessarily make him/her a good target. Figure out who your best prospects are, and find ways to connect with them. There's no sense wasting precious dollars trying to reach people who aren't likely customers. Trying to be all things to all people rarely works.

Now that you know who you're targeting, it's time to define your brand. Keep your target audience front and center as you're contemplating this. There are five key components for you to consider:

Vision

What does your business look like in five years? Are you still in one location? Do you envision major expansion? Will you have a different business model? It's critically important to know where you're headed, so you can keep your eye on the prize and make business decisions that support your vision.

Promise

What is the single most important benefit that your business gives to its customers? Think about your target audience and what's important to them. Is it exquisitely prepared food? Is it delivering a high-quality dining experience? Do you provide a terrific value? Defining the promise that you make to your customers will help you stay focused, and reinforce what you stand for with customers and prospects.

Proofs

How do you pay off your promise in the daily running of your business? If your promise is the offer of exquisitely prepared food, your proofs should be things that support your promise — for example, being



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committed to using only the highest quality and freshest ingredients, having the most creative chef in the region, or staying true to your French heritage.

Personality

Brands have personalities, just like people do. If you think about your business as if it were a person, how would you describe it? Are you friendly? A stickler for detail? Adventurous? A bit disheveled? Try to articulate the most positive personality traits about your brand and carry those through in everything you do, i.e. in the type of staff you hire, the tone of your advertising, and the vibe of your restaurant.

Values

What are the core tenets that reflect what you stand for, and how you do business? Do you adhere to the highest ethical standards? Do you treat your employees as if they are family? Do you put the customer first, no matter what? Defining your values and paying them off can pay real dividends with both customers, and in attracting and retaining key staff.

Once you've zeroed in on your target audience and defined your brand, share it. Let your employees know what you stand for, and it will inspire and empower them to help you achieve your goals.

Then, live it. Take a step back and look at your operations. Make positive changes to better support your brand and where it's headed. Try to stay true to it. Use your newly defined brand as the foundation for your business decisions, and as the guidepost for your business' successful future. •