

Rebrand with a Plan

Use these seven keys to ensure a smooth transition.

► **IF YOU REBRAND** poorly, your brand can suffer badly. Scariest still: Your margin for error is slim at best. But you can improve the odds considerably by rebranding according to these seven principles.

1. Make sure you're clear about what a brand is.

A brand is much more than your logo. A brand is the sum of the messages, interactions and experiences that a customer has with your product, services and people.

To customers, a brand is the promise of an experience as well as their experience of that promise delivered. A brand is a valuable asset that must be nurtured by delivering valuable content in social media; friendly, quick customer service; personal and authentic responses to every customer who contacts you; and respecting customers' desires to opt in or out of direct marketing contact with your brand.

2. Maintain control of the rebranding process.

Because a brand equates to a company's crown jewels, people can be sensitive about any shift whatsoever. As a result, a renaming effort can easily deteriorate into personal likes/dislikes of executives or owners (or even what their spouses think). Consider hiring an unbiased consultant or agency to facilitate the process and outcome.

As your effort unfolds, ground your brand in a strategy that reflects not only the brand's origins but also its ultimate destination in the current and future marketplace. Some aspects of your brand (great sensory appeal, supreme customer service, excellent training, meeting deadlines, etc.) will probably never change, but keep an open mind. Small ideas can grow larger, and seemingly big ideas can diminish over time, depending on marketplace demands, competition, tech breakthroughs and the like.

3. Understand that a brand has two owners: The marketer owns 50 percent, and the customer owns 100 percent.

Yes, I know that's 150 percent—and here's why. The marketer produces messages, products and services. But your customers experience the brand, and in the digital age, they are in ultimate control of whether they will ignore your messages, view/listen to them, share them with or without favorable comments, or make a purchase.

The takeaway: During your rebranding, check in with customers and include employees who have the most customer contact as major players. Tap the knowledge of a sample of the internal people who deliver your brand's experience—folks on the helpline, installers, employees in the returns department, and even the back-office staff, line workers and warehouse crew. Their feedback can be crucial for ensuring a positive customer experience.

Another benefit of inclusion: When you ask for, listen to and acknowledge multiple contributions from your employees, people within the company will feel they have been heard and then will be less likely to criticize and more likely to own the result. The worst course is to decide branding issues at the top level and then dictate to the troops who must deliver the brand experience. You risk a loss of buy-in and relevancy.

4. Your logo, tag line, typography and design should tell a single-minded story.

The look, feel and message of a brand should tell one story. Every brand is heroic in some way. Think about what your brand fights for and against what odds. Consider what is at stake for customers, their problems and how you solve them. By becoming a hero to your customers, you make heroes out of them when they deliver at their workplaces, within their families, among their friends, etc.

FedEx and National Car Rental are great examples of this focus. "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight"—is FedEx's famously hero-making pledge.

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And the FedEx logo—with its distinctive typeface and color contrast—is a consistent presence on boxes, envelopes and trucks. National Car Rental makes everything green, from its logo and signage to its heroic tag line, “Go like a pro.” Renters get the “green light” to choose any car on the lot. Both of these companies have truly unifying imagery, promises and customer experiences.

5. Always remember that a brand should remain fluid—but exercise caution.

Changing your brand radically is risky. If the effort fails, it can be expensive and disruptive. Consider Tropicana’s 2009 revamp of the established image on its orange juice packaging—the drinking straw stuck into a fresh orange. Television advertising had hammered this straw-in-orange visual for years. What’s more, this clever device supported Tropicana’s key benefit: “never from

6. Never stop supporting and promoting your brand.

Successful brands are a living presence in the marketplace and have a tangible relationship with their customers. It’s easy to support a brand in boom times, but studies repeatedly have shown that brands with consistent support during economic lulls gain greater sales and market share when spending rebounds as compared with companies that reduce support.

In 2013 Cadillac recorded its best year since 2007 because even during the recession, it steadily upgraded designs, performance and technology while introducing new models. This investment paid off as GM reported that more than 60 percent of Cadillac buyers are trading in a brand other than Cadillac; the GM luxury brand has surpassed Audi, Infiniti, Volvo, Lincoln, Land Rover and Jaguar.



CHRIS HONDROS/GETTY IMAGES



COURTESY OF NATIONAL CAR RENTAL



MARK PERLSTEIN



COURTESY OF CADILLAC

concentrate—fresh-squeezed orange juice.” The new packaging design featured a clean, possibly more generic, photo of juice in a glass. Consumer rejection was swift. By some estimates, sales plummeted 20 percent within about seven weeks. Tropicana had altered a branded asset, with dire results, and would have to reverse course. Yet in 2011, Tropicana avoided a sales dip when executing another major change—switching from paper cartons to clear plastic—with the straw-in-orange labeling.

External factors such as tenacious competition, industry trends and altered consumer preferences will force you to continually reassess your brand. Think of your brand as a buoy solidly anchored to the ocean floor but able to weave and bob in the waves. So create and invest in positioning that is broad enough to be as relevant today as yesterday and flexible enough to be relevant in the future.

7. Protect your brand.

Once you’ve refreshed (or designed) your brand, appoint a brand champion. This key leader typically is a senior person in marketing, and he or she will publish a brand style guide. This person also will police internal and external communications (advertising, public relations, sales, retail sites, correspondence, etc.) to be sure that all employees use the appropriate logo, icon, tagline and templates for ads, emails, direct marketing, social media—every outgoing message in every medium. A brand united by look, feel and message is the goal wherever the customer engages.

Use these principles while being strategic, sticking with your company’s cultural roots, staying relevant, and keeping customers’ benefits front and center at all times. **S**

These four companies serve up great branding lessons.