

Brand is one of those words that gets tossed around so frequently, that the actual meaning of what branding is can seem uncertain. We all know that branding is something that we have to do for our business, but what does that really entail?

In this guide, we'll take a deep dive into some of the many ways that you can think about branding, and how to use it to do things like define your business and speak with more clarity to your customers.

A great deal of research has been done on the science behind why branding works or doesn't work. For instance, various [studies](#) have demonstrated that people are able to derive inherent meaning from the combinations of certain sounds. This research has led brands to develop names for companies and products, the sounds of which produce certain effects within the minds of consumers.

Likewise, there is [science to support](#) the use of specific [visual symbols](#) to communicate attributes of a brand's identity in the design of a logo.

That said, you don't have to hire a team of researchers to help you develop your brand. You can start by examining the brands that you admire, the branding of your competitors, and by asking yourself a few simple questions:

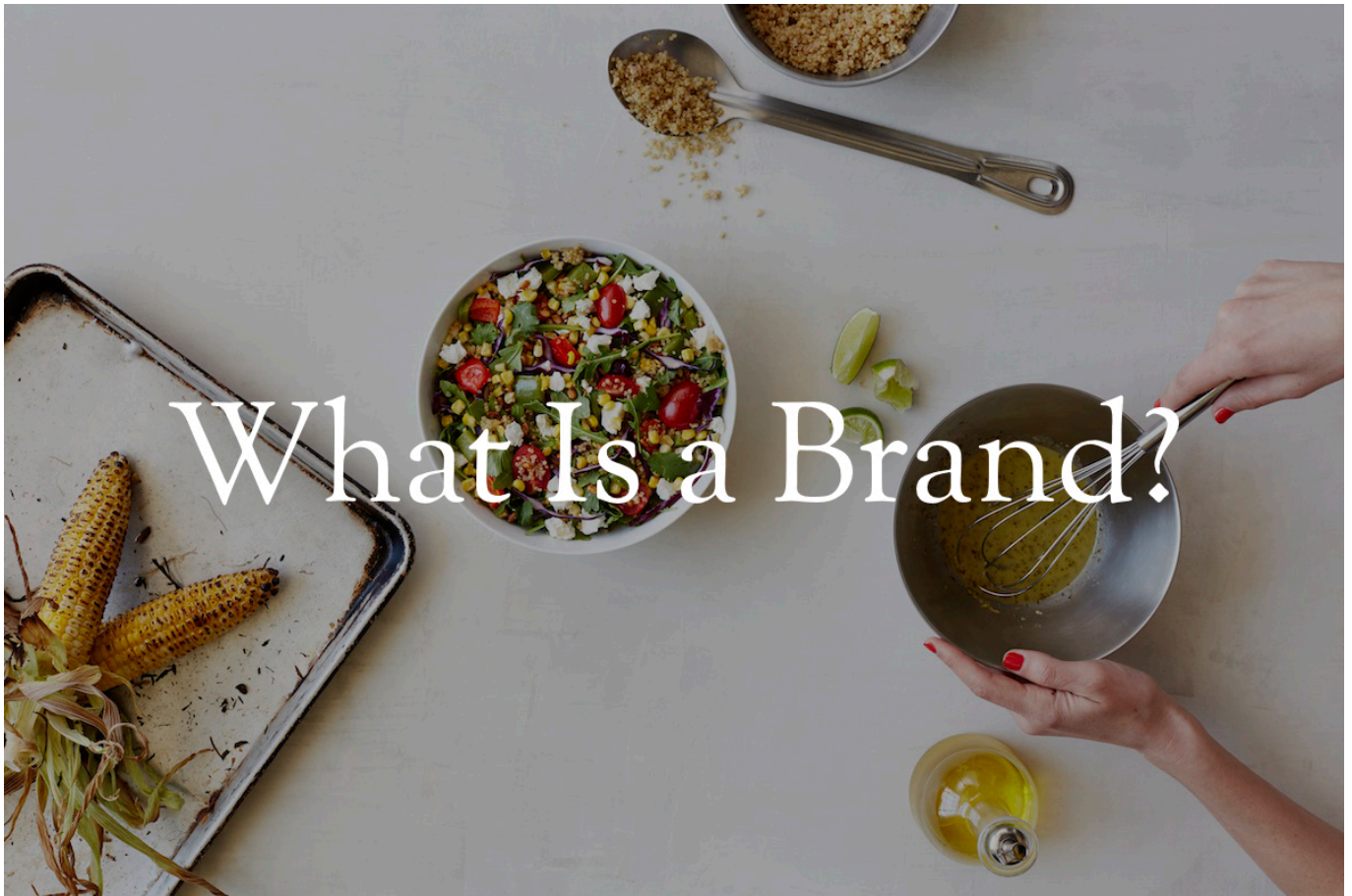
***Who do we think we are?***

***Who do our customers think we are?***

***What do we want to become?***

If the answers to those three questions are in more or less perfect alignment, feel free to skip this guide. If there's more work to be done in getting those answers to square up, let's continue with a few definitions.

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## **What Is a Brand**

At its core, your brand is what consumers know about you.

This is established by your image, your products and your reputation.

What does your brand look like? What typefaces and design choices have you made? How do those things make people feel? What story are you telling? Can your customers relate to that or see themselves as being somehow a part of that story?

What products do you offer? Are they high quality? Convenient? Unique? What is different about them?

What do people say about you? If someone is a customer of your brand, what does that say

about them?

A mature brand communicates instant understanding. A developing brand helps consumers understand who 'you' are in relation to what 'they' need. A poorly developed brand feels disconnected from its customers, disjointed, lacking definition.

Branding is mostly intangible. It primarily exists within the philosophical orientation of a company, and within the minds of consumers. However, branding produces real world results:

***Good branding helps customers make key buying decisions.***

***Good branding tells customers what they will get.***

***Good branding makes people feel safe.***

***Good branding builds trusting relationships founded on honesty, authenticity and genuine understanding.***

A good brand is built on good products, accurate and evocative marketing, and the thoughts and behaviors of customers.

While we generally think of branding as being mostly consumer-facing, there are also internal strategic benefits to thoughtfully articulating your brand.

A well defined brand acts as a set of guardrails for guiding a business toward what it should do and what it shouldn't do. Thus, good branding is useful not just for differentiating yourself in the market, but for guiding your choices as a business owner.

If your brand is built on a reputation for using quality parts, customers will have a reasonable expectation that you're not going to cut corners in your supply chain. If your brand is known for innovation, customers will reasonably expect that your products will be relevant in the future.

## **What is culture?**

Culture is an aggregate of images, values, beliefs, history and ideas. Every brand fits within a culture. The strongest brands define a facet of the culture they live within.

If you do culture right, people will define a small slice of themselves as ‘the type of person who’ goes to your coffee shop.

***Patagonia immediately brings to mind the outdoors.***

***The New Yorker is something smart people read.***

***Shake Shack is different than other burger places.***

As it relates to your brand, culture is what people know about the world that your product or service exists within. It is a set of parameters that define the expectations that customers have about who you should be and how your brand will fit into their lives.

Broadly speaking, culture is the world. Your brand’s culture is what you contribute to that world.

Imagine you own a coffee shop. There are plenty of coffee shops that just happen to service commuters in an area that gets a lot of foot traffic. By contrast, the best coffee shops offer those commuters something more than just a cup of coffee or a scone. They have a sense of belonging in the community, they are a place where customers gather to participate in a ritual that makes a big difference in their day. If you do culture right, people will define a small slice of themselves as ‘the type of person who’ goes to your coffee shop.

The easiest way to do this is to embrace and emphasize your natural appeal to a specific subculture. Your brand should have an authentic personality — one that resonates with a certain group of people... most likely, people like you.

Authenticity is the most assured way to attain cultural credibility. If you are approaching culture as an enthusiastic participant, rather than as an opportunistic vendor, you are much more likely to develop positive cultural brand associations with a loyal base of customers.

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In order to find a strong cultural footing for your brand, you should identify where your brand exists at an intersection of converging needs and identifying attributes.

***Barnes & Noble is a bookstore.***

***The Strand is a home for people who love books.***

## **What are aesthetics?**

The first thing most of us think of when we hear the word 'aesthetics' is how something looks. Is it nice looking or ugly? But aesthetics is actually a branch of philosophy that exists to examine the nature of beauty: why things look or feel nice, as opposed to determining whether or not they do look nice.

This is useful for constructing a brand because it will guide you to make the right choices to communicate the meaning of your brand in a way that will feel relevant to customers.

## **What are customers?**

Customers are not really the people that buy your products, they are the people that use your products. A consumer may buy a product once. A customer will come back. A customer thinks about you before they think about your competition. But in order to think about you in a way that matters, there has to be something more than just your product to think about. That's your brand.

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## **Positioning**

The positioning of your brand is something that you decide upon from the outset, but also something that you will continuously adapt according to market signals (customers buying your product) and cultural changes (how your brand fits in the world).

Brand positioning will involve making choices about who you want to appeal to (what psychographic slice of the market you want to own), how you want people to feel about you (what associations you want them to make between your brand and things they want or need), and how you will reach those people (what your marketing and awareness strategy will look like).

## **Identity**

Your identity is both a first impression and also a lasting consumer association. A successful



brand identity communicates as much information about the brand as possible in less than a second.

Your logo, the typefaces you choose, the imagery and content in your advertising and marketing, and any other public-facing component of your brand all constitute your brand identity. It is vital that there is a harmonious relationship between your identity and the product that you offer.

If you use an abstract, difficult-to-read font to sell dishwashing detergent, you are most likely going to confuse and alienate consumers, rather than converting them into customers.

It is necessary to take a thoughtful aesthetic approach to developing the identity of your brand. What is the visual language that you need to use in order to communicate the messages that you want consumers to receive? How can that be condensed into something that can be understood within a momentary glance?

If your approach is overly conservative or traditional, you run the risk of failing to differentiate yourself from competing brands. Even in a category of business that offers relatively 'unsexy' products, it is essential to have a thoughtfully developed aesthetic to express your brand's identity.

Visit the [Logo Archive](#) and take a look at some logos that these curators have singled out for being particularly memorable. They are helpfully divided into different industries and techniques for easy browsing.

Using whatever impressions you've formed looking at those logos, begin to imagine what kind of direction you will take (or what kind of direction you will give a designer) in formulating a visual symbol to represent your brand.

If you decide instead to go with a typeface, spend some time looking at competing brands as well as iconic brands and consider what the typefaces they've chosen say about their brands.

Consider the motion title of the independent film studio Annapurna Pictures

It communicates a nostalgic idea about falling in love with film by watching worn out VHS tapes. Annapurna's films are typically a bit nerdy, a bit different, and a bit cool. That brand identity is perfectly encapsulated by the title that displays before all of their films.

When a trailer for a new Annapurna film plays before a film, and that motion title appears on the screen, we already have some idea of what to expect.

## **Personality**

The personality of your brand is the psychic manifestation of your brand's identity. If your brand was a person, who would it be? What does that person think like? Talk like? What effect do they have on the people around them? What kind of language do they use to communicate with others? Is it erudite or plainspoken? Is it aspirational or humble?

While your brand's personality will live in the intangible atmosphere that surrounds your brand, people will also come across it in the channels by which you communicate with the public.

It's tempting to fall into the trap of developing a personality and voice that mimics the way people speak online, however this is almost never the right choice for a brand. Rare exceptions, such as the [Twitter presence of Denny's](#), the diner chain, are nearly impossible to reproduce. That account works because it doesn't work, and it turns the brand into a circus sideshow... 'wtf' is a very hard look to pull off.

It's hard to be funny online. If you're funny and that aligns well with your brand, by all means, seize the day. But rest assured that it's good enough, and significantly more attainable, to simply do you.

The personality of your brand has the power to create strong positive or negative brand associations in the minds of consumers. So while developing a shallow, meme-like personality may not be a good choice — there's really no one-size-fits-all answer here.

The best thing to do may be to take the attributes of your brand that you want people to understand, and look at the landscape of your competitors — what is their presence like? Now consider how you can be different from them. Within your industry, is there a prevailing tone? Rather than assimilating, how can you strike a resonant chord that sets you apart?

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## What Channels Can You Use to Build Your Brand?

Your brand's channels are the ways that you reach consumers. The places, the platforms and the technology.

If you operate a **physical storefront**, restaurant, or other real-world place, that location is probably your main channel for reaching consumers. Your physical location is the place where you are least encumbered by any obstacles to effectively communicate your branding.

A physical location can also be an outgrowth of a digital venture.

There is a record label called [RVNG Intl](#). Over the past several years, the label has quietly released dozens of records that have made a fairly big impact in the niche that they operate within. For most of the label's life, they have existed primarily as an online outlet that releases physical records. However, a few years ago they opened a physical space called

[Commend](#). They describe Commend as ‘the gravitational center of the RVNG universe’. At the space, they produce live music events and readings, host art exhibits and various workshops, and sell a curated range of goods from artists and craftspeople they admire.

In every sense, Commend is an expression of the RVNG brand, brought to life in 3D.

RVNG is a label that is situated within a historic tradition of downtown NYC experimental music and art. In other words, Commend appeals to a narrowly defined subculture. Commend reflects that ethos by facilitating performances and relationships within a community that is descended from that lineage. Entering Commend is a glimpse inside the brand (and brain) of the minds behind RVNG.

What does your location tell people about your brand? This applies whether you run a retail business or not. An office sends lots of signals, not just to clients, but also to your employees. This is also deeply connected to the concept of culture and aesthetics. The culture that your brand lives in is defined by the mental associations that people will make, the aesthetic that creates feelings within consumers, and the way they feel when they’re ‘in’ your brand, such as when they are in your store or office... or on your **website**.

Your website is a perfect place to familiarize people with your branding. It is a place to consolidate the messages, identity, aesthetic and other ‘vibe’ related elements of your brand.

The copy that is written on your website should reflect your brand’s personality. The visual design of your website should communicate your identity and aesthetic. The functionality of your website should give customers a chance to interact with your brand in whatever ways can best be enabled by a web experience.

Image galleries, menus, directions, your ‘about’ page, a blog — all of these are opportunities to moderate the associations that you want consumers to make with your brand.

If a customer is deciding between two restaurants serving Peruvian food, and the website of one brand presents an image of sophistication and upscale treatment, while the other website conveys a more authentic Peruvian experience, perhaps through the use of images of street vendors or beaches, customers will get a better sense of the choice they are making between the two restaurants. The basic ingredients of the dishes may be the same, but the identity of the restaurants couldn’t be more separate.

Use your website to educate your customers about the experience that they will have with

your brand.

Many people will first discover your brand through **social media**.

It used to be that social media could be described as where we live our lives online, but that's no longer the case. Social media is now just an extension of our lives. In many cases, it threads together disparate parts of our lives — the past (old friends and contacts), the present (family, friends and colleagues) and the future (relationships that emerge as a result of connections that might not otherwise take place).

More than anything, it is a forum for an endlessly evolving conversation about anything and everything.

When people are discussing your brand online, they are not really talking about your brand. They are talking about their own lives.

Social media has presented brands and marketers with an incredible opportunity to reach consumers in a way that would have been impossible before.

Brand pages and profiles allow companies to interact with their customers and the public in a way that has dramatically shifted how business gets done. However, there are limits to what brands should reasonably expect as a result of their efforts on social media.

Most of the social media communication that brands do is one way. It is primarily a channel for growing awareness and spreading information. Even if large numbers of consumers wanted to communicate directly with brands, most companies do not have the scale to facilitate that kind of relationship in a meaningful way.

Working with influencers is perilous because influencer marketing is well understood by consumers now. A badly misaligned influencer endorsement now reeks of the kind of cheesy product placement that distracts viewers in bad movies.

The best brand opportunities in social media are through precisely targeted advertising and as an amplification tool to broadcast the image, content and culture of your brand.

With that in mind, apply focus to your branding efforts on social media by embracing patterns of existing and likely user behaviors. If you mess this up, you may come off as desperate, out of touch or tone deaf.

Imagine a company that makes socks. This company starts an Instagram profile. There's a lot of options for how you might portray a company that sells socks.

***Some ideas:***

Pictures of the entire process of how socks are designed, manufactured and sold. This Instagram profile features people sketching sock designs, people actually making socks, perhaps highlighting how these socks are ethically manufactured, shares pictures of people in the shipping department, showing the real lives of various employees across the entire operation of the company.

Pictures of scantily clad people wearing socks with all the naked bits blurred out. Furthermore, should it be pictures of traditionally good looking people, naked, wearing the socks, or pictures of 'normal' people, naked wearing the socks?

Pictures of people from a first-person vantage point. The camera represents the eyes of the person wearing the socks. Each photo is a shot of someone reclining with their feet up, wearing the socks, and in the distance is a view of a beautiful vista, perhaps from a tent, looking out, or elsewhere in nature.

What different ideas do these social images communicate about the brands?

All of these ideas could be used to sell the exact same socks, and yet, they represent distinct brand identities.

Put as much thought as you can into what brand messages you want to communicate with your social media presence.

Act in accordance with all of the different facets of your brand's image. If your brand has a sophisticated look and feel, don't use spammy tactics that cheapen or undermine the way you want people to see you. For instance, if you've put a lot of thought into creating a beautiful logo and use elegant typefaces, don't create memes or imagery that reflects poor design choices.

Be consistent with your brand's values in order to communicate integrity and intelligence.

If your brand is known for the quality of its products, project an image of timelessness and deliberateness online.

If your brand is known for products that are extremely useful, try to extend that perception by being a helpful resource to people. That could mean offering hands on advice or expertise in social comments, or it could mean offering tutorials, workshops or how-to's.

When it comes to success on social media, competitive research can really help. Look at the top performers in your category and see what you can take from their successes. Look at what under-performers are doing, and consider the reasons that their efforts may be falling flat.

### ***A Note on Working With Influencers: Be Careful***

Because brands have a limited reach on many social platforms, they often turn to influencers to make up for this lost audience share. An influencer is someone who steers a conversation online. They move the needle within their culture.

Working with influencers is perilous because influencer marketing is well understood by consumers now. A badly misaligned influencer endorsement now reeks of the kind of cheesy product placement that distracts viewers in bad movies.

I recently had a conversation with a couple who own a few successful businesses. One of those businesses is a swimwear label. They don't advertise through any conventional channels. All they do is pay models on Instagram to wear a new product in a post, and whatever it is, it sells out instantly. It's somewhat expensive to buy this exposure, but the company more than makes up for the expense both in sales and in brand equity.

***The Instagram post creates awareness.***

***The association informs consumer perceptions.***

***Customers buy that product, begin following the brand, and buy future products.***

***Customers post images of themselves wearing those products, developing network effects.***

***The brand grows in both financial (sales) and intangible ways (brand equity).***

This works because there is strong alignment between the brand's offering and the

subculture that they are appealing to. They understand the customer that they want, and the Instagram model is the medium they can use to reach them. The brand's competency is communicated by the fact that a stylish woman is wearing their stylish design. If they were not a swimsuit company, but instead, some other less relevant product or service, consumers are less likely to be persuaded that the brand is credible.

Working with influencers is perilous because influencer marketing is well understood by consumers now. A badly misaligned influencer endorsement now reeks of the kind of cheesy product placement that distracts viewers in bad movies.

What **other networks** exist to support awareness level outreach for your brand?

Where would people go to learn about your product if they didn't already know about it? If you're a restaurant, that might be Yelp or Instagram. If you're a clothing brand, it could be a style blog or a popular ecommerce seller. If you're a design studio, that might be a visual repository such as Behance. If you're a consulting agency, that might be Harvard Business Review or Fast Company.

Utilize the existing infrastructure and audiences that are in place to inform your prospective customers about your products or services, and do a really great job at cultivating a presence there.

Study what the best performers do on those networks and emulate their behavior. Take it a step further by offering something valuable that is missing.

## **Content**

Content is the stuff that you produce for an online audience to drive awareness of your brand and build associations in the minds of consumers.

Many brands worry about things like going viral or generating online buzz. But in general, while these outcomes can produce some immediate positive effects, they may not provide lasting brand equity.

Brand equity is the credibility and trust that you have stored up in the minds of consumers.

Generating real value as a brand (and thus, creating brand equity) is about communicating necessary and relevant messages to the right consumers.



You don't have to reach everyone to be successful. Virality is a mirage.

Creating content for audiences online gives you the opportunity to embed your brand's messages in entertaining or informative experiences for prospective customers.

***A funny video tells viewers a lot about your personality.***

***A video that features a deep message about real feelings can situate your brand as an ally in the emotional life of a customer.***

***An informative blog post that demystifies a misunderstood topic or hard-to-learn skill authenticates your voice as a credible expert within your field.***

***A podcast about the world that you operate in illuminates the thoughts and ideas that go into creating your product, how you want it to be received, and how you see yourself in the world.***

The value of things like social media and other digital communities is not in creating the most far reaching awareness, it is in the fact that powerful tools now exist to reach the right people and to connect with them in an authentic way.

Among the top 500 Youtube channels with the most subscribers, there are very few corporate brands. This, despite the fact that companies like Red Bull, which is currently the 256th most popular Youtube channel, spend billions of dollars producing branded content. That's not to say that Red Bull hasn't been successful in creating a consumer brand perception that elevates it above other energy drinks. It has been remarkably successful at doing that. It's just that there are 255 other content creators with a bigger audience than them. And most of those channels spend a very small fraction of what Red Bull spends in producing content.

You don't have to reach everyone to be successful. Virality is a mirage.

Red Bull's marketing reaches the right people to accomplish the brand's aims. It lets people know what Red Bull stands for and supports — extreme sports, in the case of sports related marketing, and club culture, in the form of the Red Bull Music Academy events and content. Red Bull positions itself as fuel for high-energy sports-maniacs. It also positions itself as a brand that first found success by selling their beverage to nightclubs, and celebrates that part of its heritage.

Most small businesses have considerably more modest aims than a multinational corporation. The people that you need to connect with are probably local, or at least located within a relatively definable subculture. Focus on reaching those people with your brand's communications, and you will win. Do not waste your time trying to reach people that will not contribute to the health of your business.

**The rules here are:**

1. Create content that is actually good, which people will enjoy and which creates positive mental associations with your brand.
2. Realize that you likely will not be able to compete with the most popular content creators in your category because people would generally rather connect with other people than with brands. You are most likely not competing with entertainers or personalities, you are competing with other brands.



## **Experience**

Most of the preceding bits of brand advice have been built around creating the pieces of a story that you can broadcast to consumers to inform them about what your brand is and who you are. It is top-down messaging. You are in control. But there is another crucial component to the branding puzzle that has less to do with you, and everything to do with your customers.

What is it like to actually be a customer of your brand?

Using your brand's products or services or being a patron of your brand's business has the potential to define meaningful identity characteristics for your customers.

***People who use Trello are organized and prepared to get work done.***

***People who eat at Momofuku are engaged with food culture.***

***People who shop at Ssense care about design and like to stay ahead of trends.***

In order to generate the brand associations necessary to confer these characteristics and attributes, you have to develop a reputation in the minds of consumers. In order to do that, you have to become a reliable source for good experiences.

If Trello was simply another project management tool, it wouldn't be one of the first choices that people make when planning a project.

If Momofuku didn't update their menu frequently, or cultivate a public image for chef David Chang, it wouldn't be a destination for people that are excited about eating new and interesting food.

If Ssense wasn't highly curatorial in the clothes that they offer to shoppers, it would struggle to differentiate itself from any other online shopping retailer.

The will to provide great customer experiences is the fuel to develop a lasting reputation that will meaningfully grow your brand.

## **How to Think About Value**

One thing to consider is the idea of **value**.

Taken from one perspective, value could mean that your brand's products are identified as being a better deal than the competition because you are known for your fair/reasonable prices.

From another perspective, value could mean that your brand's products are considered valuable because they last a lifetime, provide a more distinguished experience, or will enhance a customer's reputation or self-conception, hence justifying their premium pricing.

So, not only is pricing part of your brand, as in, how much the thing actually costs. But also how well the price matches the perceived value, and what implications that has for the consumer's concept of your brand.

Ikea's brand communicates utility at an affordable price.

Value is a fluid metric that takes in the satisfaction of the experience and the time and money it takes to make someone happy.

## **What is The Mission?**

Customers also make identity associations with your brand because they can make a real connection between your values (as in the values of your brand's character) and their own personal values.

One way to manifest this is by **emphasizing the mission** of the founder.

Not all brands are driven by a singular, propulsive 'mission', but the ones that are have a tremendous opportunity to use it to the advantage of distinguishing their brand from their competitors.

When you think of a mission, you might first be tempted to think of a company like Tom's or Charity Water, but that's not necessarily what we mean here. Sure, a charitable or values-driven component can make you stand out, but having a mission doesn't mean giving to charity. One of the best ways to emphasize the mission of your brand is to express it through the image of the founder.

Elon Musk owns lots of companies — Tesla, SpaceX, Solar City, The Boring Company, just to name a few. The commonality here is that every single one of these is a huge, potentially world-saving idea. People sometimes refer to Elon Musk as the real life Tony Stark, and this is because he is a man on a mission. It just so happens that his mission is saving mankind.

When Steve Jobs created all of those Think Different ads for Apple, he wasn't just being cute or clever or trying to get you to associate Apple with creativity by co-opting culture. He was expressing the ethos of his mission. He wanted Apple to be seen as a hub of innovation, in a lane of their own, and for many years, they were.

Richard Branson's Virgin Group of companies are also the product of a mission-driven approach to business. The Virgin mission is something like, 'Hey, why not, if they can do it, so can we.' [The humble beginnings of Virgin Records weren't much more than a postage scam](#). This laissez-faire approach to expansion is how they've wound up with an airline, a soft drink, a company exploring space tourism, and dozens and dozens more companies. Many of these businesses fail, while some become wildly successful. Richard Branson is on a mission to prove that Virgin can do anything.

There are plenty of small to medium-sized businesses with founders who are heroes in their own cities and communities.

As a closing note to this idea of using a mission to brand yourself, it must be stated that having a charismatic founder with a public persona is not a prerequisite for being a mission driven business. Companies can transmit their culture and their mission through branding as well. This is very common for clothing labels, for instance. Many fashion brands are known for a certain mission with a brand identity that outshines the founders, designers and owners.

## **Wrapping Up**

The most important thing to remember about good branding is that it produces results. Whether that result is sales to customers or clarity in the marketplace, or simply planting your flag in the minds of your customers, branding must make some sort of impact in order to be successful. A clear, lasting impact. You can only make an impact if you can make a real connection. Be sure that you're being true to the connective tissue that binds your brand to your customers.

Having a reliable set of filters that you can run all of your messaging through will make things very clear for you.

Here are some examples of filters that you should apply to make sure that your branding remains consistent:

**Who is my customer?** Be as specific as you can be. Make sure you are always talking to

them.

**What problem do they have?** What do they need or want that they don't have? Proceed carefully if you want to talk about something other than the connection you have to their problem.

**Who am I to them?** How clear is my identity to them... do they know what we do? Do they know what we're like... Do they know how we're different?

**What do I know about how it feels to be them?** You should have a very clear empathetic sense about how your customer feels. Do your customer's realize that you are on their level?

**What expertise do I have to be able to help them?** Why would your customer come to you instead of someone else. What do you have or know that others don't? Do your customer's know this?

**Does your branding make it clear how you can solve your customer's problem?** Have you told them? You should tell them. They won't know otherwise. Be direct. Most people don't do well with vagaries. Say, 'buy this thing and feel better.' Most brands are afraid of making a hard sell because they worry that it may compromise their branding. It almost certainly will not, in virtually any case, ever. Give people a plan and tell them what to you want them to do.

**Do your customers have a good idea of how much better they'll feel if they buy your product or pay for your service?** There many different ways for you to show your customers what life will be like for them if they become your customer, but pictures of people smiling while using your product are a good place to start.

**Do your customers know that failing to use your product will consign them a worse fate?** What will happen to your customers if they don't buy your product? Will they be lame? Unfulfilled? Less than satisfied? Still hungry? Perceived as less smart? Not part of a desirable group?

If you use the filters above to clarify your branding, your customers will know exactly who you are, what you offer, and what is has to do with them. And that's exactly what branding is supposed to do.

Good luck.