

Find Your Market Niche

And Build a Stronger Brand

By *CHRISTINE L. PILCH*

Many business leaders think their logo is their brand. Actually, that's just one element of it. You can easily purchase a new logo and stationery package, but a new graphic look, unsupported by an understanding of your market niche, is just artwork. A new look alone is really a waste of money. Your brand is so much more than that.

Ultimately, your brand is the way people feel about you — good, bad or indifferent. Since it is the summation of your customers' total experience with your company and/or product, unless you are creating a new company, product, or service from the ground up, you can't just wave a magic wand and create a brand. It is the indelible mark imprinted in your customers' minds. Your logo just happens to be the symbol representing it.

Think of your favorite sports team. Its logo represents a lot of emotion. Another logo can just as easily conjure up feelings of dislike, yet they are both just symbols. A logo is the visual equivalent of Pavlov's bell. It incites a memory of an experience and a feeling, and it helps to condition your customers.

The primary marketing aspect to be concerned with is positioning. Your brand's position in the market is the basis of your identity and value proposition, and it helps to define your niche. Your positioning becomes the very heart of what is communicated to your target audience because it demonstrates your advantage over your competition. It focuses your advertising on the benefits that your customers actually get from your product. When you fully understand your customers,

you can create an image that represents your product as a direct reflection of what they want.

Apple was brilliant in positioning the iPod as the MP3 player of choice. It's not a unique product. There are many competitive MP3 players on the market that work just as well, with similar features. Apple was smart, though. It came up with a sleek design, positioned

about determining who your customers are, what is appealing to them and what they want and need, then determining why you are their best source for your product. Positioning turns your business focus to the only people who matter, your customers. It creates a customer-centric culture and is the first step toward creating your brand.

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it as the cream of the crop, and created a desire among a specific market niche, discriminating potential MP3 player users. Apple created the *perception* that the iPod was the MP3 player of choice. It was so successful in branding it through its positioning that iPod is now a status symbol and *the* MP3 player wanted by millions. In fact, people are starting to refer to all MP3 players as iPods regardless of the brand, like calling a bandage a Band-Aid or a tissue a Kleenex. Now that's branding!

One trap that many business owners fall into is believing that their brand is what they think about their product, when in fact that's not necessarily true. Your opinion is not nearly as important as your customers' impressions about your product or service.

It is possible for you to guide customer perception of your product, however. Positioning is all

Positioning shows you where your niche is. You need to reach a critical mass of your target demographic with your message, so no matter how hard a salesperson pressures you to try his media, if your customers don't pay attention to it, it's a waste of money. If your positioning is done properly, you will know your customers so well that poor, money-wasting choices will be eliminated.

There is a way for your company to create a unique position in a crowded marketplace. Consider the following coffee industry example. After everybody copied its flavored coffees, Dunkin' Donuts chose to develop specialized products. They went after a market looking for tantalizing cold drinks. Their Coolatas remain a hugely popular warm-weather treat with average, everyday Americans, and their Smoothies are another blockbuster success. Dunkin' Donuts is

careful about creating messages that appeal to everyday folks.

Starbucks went to market differently. The average-Joe appeal position was taken by Dunkin', so rather than being a wannabe or a me-too, they chose to capture the attention of a different kind of customer. For these customers who don't mind higher prices, the Starbucks appeal is as much about the cup as what's inside. They consider themselves Starbucks drinkers, and this actually becomes a part of their identity.

Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks are both powerful brands that got that way through consistent and diligent positioning strategies. The common denominator is that the customers of both want beverages, but the companies went after different segments of the population. They thoroughly know their customers, and they create and market only products that appeal to these folks. They don't try to be all things to all people, but rather stick to their own niches.

So, what is your niche? Have you clearly identified your customers and positioned your product to appeal specifically to them? Remember that *your* perception is irrelevant; so as long as you understand the demographics and psychographics of your customers, you can create a brand that is relevant and holds appeal to them. Once you do that, you can grow.

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