Building an effective B2B brand

A NOT-SO-WHITE PAPER BY D+i CREATIVE
Let’s talk business.
Your business.
Specifically, business to business (B2B).

We have worked with just about every business model in the B2B space over the past two decades. Be that professional services, manufacturing, architecture, commercial real estate or financial services. With such a vast sampling, we’ve picked up some valuable insights into successful B2B brands along the way.

The following content will not cover tactics.

This not-so-white paper is meant to help CEOs, marketing managers and B2B business owners begin to think about their company value proposition, their ability to differentiate and how they might leverage a strong brand to build their business.

Introduction
Defining brand

‘Brand’ may be the most ubiquitous and misunderstood business term in today’s B2B environment. For the purposes of this document, we will start with Walter Landor’s definition.

“PRODUCTS ARE MADE IN THE FACTORY, BUT BRANDS ARE CREATED IN THE MIND.”

This is ultimately saying that the typical tangible brand assets that the majority of the public think of when hearing the word ‘brand’ (name, logo, product, advertisement) can be effectively managed by a marketing department, but the brand itself is created by the individual customer/user. From the experience a customer has with a sales rep to the receipt of an invoice, each interaction with a company builds a perception and expectation in the mind of the consumer. This makes a brand connected to every aspect of your business. Managing this perception is especially crucial for B2B companies. Let’s look at some numbers:

- **77%** B2B marketing leaders say branding is critical to growth.
- **70%** B2B marketing leaders admit they are concerned about brand integrity and execution in social media.
- **59%** B2B content marketing strategies include a content mission and a differentiated story/value to deliver.
- **39%** B2B companies have a clearly defined brand strategy.

As you can see, while a majority (77%) of B2B marketing professionals recognize the importance of brand perception, they are missing critical tools essential to shaping that perception, and therefore influencing audiences.

Herein, we will take a deeper look at the invaluable process that strong brands follow in order to shape audience perceptions.
While it may seem like common sense, understanding your target audience is essential to effectively marketing to and interacting with these individuals. This is even more true for the B2B space, an industry notoriously fueled by relationships. This includes referrals, events and gatherings. You meet, you greet and try to engage with executives and decision makers that clearly need your services.

That said, these business development tactics are futile if you are not communicating with your target audience in a way which resonates with the individual. A more comprehensive understanding of your audience is essential. This can be accomplished through:

- Interviews/surveys of current and/or former customers
- Reviewing social media interactions and feedback
- Studying online reviews and/or critiques

With this insight, you can then document each of your target audience personas (executive, buyer, user, etc.) and leverage that information to help create a brand you know will resonate with each of them.
COMPETITION

The world we live in continues to get smaller. Today’s average consumer has immediate access to endless information, products and services. As such, businesses in a given industry are in near constant competition with one another.

The B2B space is no different. In most cases, your B2B company is competing with a sea of similar businesses offering similar services. That being said, no two businesses are exactly alike or function in exactly the same way. It is important to understand how your competition is differentiating themselves. An audit should be conducted of the 4-5 key competitors you routinely encounter. This audit consists of reviewing the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARKETING WEBSITES AND SALES MATERIALS</th>
<th>LANGUAGE AND DESIGN</th>
<th>CLIENTS AND TARGET AUDIENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note their content architecture, how they position their services, their people and their pricing.</td>
<td>Do they use a unique tone of voice or stick with standard jargon?</td>
<td>Who do they work with? Do they target specific personnel within a customer’s business?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review their team page. Do they showcase all of their people, or just their leaders?</td>
<td>Have they made design decisions which differentiate them from the pack?</td>
<td>Do they specialize in a certain revenue level or have a broad client base?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do they describe their services?</td>
<td>Is there an overuse of stock photography?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do they lead with benefits or just stick to features?</td>
<td>Have they done anything to differentiate their team?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they specialize in a certain service, expertise or market?</td>
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This audit helps to identify the white space you can own in the market and helps inform your next step – positioning.
B2B positioning

B2B COMPANIES CAN ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY FOR THEIR BRANDS BY EMBRACING AND LIVING BY THEIR VALUES.

BRAND PROMISE

A brand promise is a simple, yet powerful representation of the primary value offered by a company to its stakeholders, employees, vendors and clients. A single statement which drives every aspect of business, marketing, sales and office culture.

Part of identifying a unique brand promise starts with first establishing a set of core values inherent to the business itself. Here are some examples of core values for well-known brands; Slack, Dove and Uber.

- EMPATHY, COURTESY, THRIVING, CRAFTSMANSHIP, PLAYFULNESS, SOLIDARITY
- DEMOCRATIC, LIBERATING, REAL AND BEAUTIFULLY UNCOMPROMISED
- BUILD GLOBALLY, LIVE LOCALLY; CUSTOMER OBSESSED; CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES; DO THE RIGHT THING

Here are examples of brand promises from the brands mentioned above based on their core values:

- SIMPLE IS BETTER.
- YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL.
- EVERYWHERE FOR EVERYONE.

As you can see, these brands make no mention of services, products or expertise in their brand promise. Too often, B2B companies focus on communicating their products, services, price point or features to a target audience rather than emphasizing a unique differentiating benefit.
B2B EXAMPLES

The above are sample brand promises for a theoretical commercial CPA. Each of these examples leverages the least differentiated aspect of the accounting firm and any competitor could boast the exact same things. To get a truly simple, unique and powerful statement you must take a deeper look and ask harder questions. What do you believe as a company? How do your clients feel about working with you? Why do you come to work every day? Answering these type of questions starts to help us define a promise; something powerful and meaningful that clearly separates us as a company. Bearing this in mind, here are some improved suggestions that could better differentiate the same firm:

These examples put the client first. They define why the firm exists and provide a sense for the feeling a client will have working with them. These are the statements which start to differentiate a B2B company.
“THE REPUTATION OF A COMPANY (ITS BRAND BY ANY OTHER NAME) IS SO IMPORTANT THAT IT COULD ACCOUNT FOR 50%...OF THE BUYING DECISION”

With the foundation of a brand promise, the next step is to focus on defining brand positioning. Your positioning dictates how that brand promise is communicated to your target audience and will serve as the genesis for all marketing and sales communications. These will in turn build your brand. Elements of a positioning include:

- **Frame of Reference**: Simply, what your company does.
- **Point of Differentiation**: One thing your company does that is unique.
- **Reasons to Believe**: Business pillars which support your differentiation.
- **Target Audience**: A short list of your customer types / industries.
Brand design and communications

“ONE OF THE MOST COMMONLY OVERLOOKED ELEMENTS OF A LEAD-GENERATION ENGINE IS ‘THE BIG IDEA’ - THE CREATIVE EXPRESSION”

With a thorough understanding of your target audiences, key competitors and a powerful promise and positioning, it is now time to bring the brand to life. Utilizing all insights and materials prepared thus far, it is time to engage a creative agency to create the outward expression of your company, also known as a brand expression.

The brand expression is the verbal and visual definition of your positioning. This includes both visual (logo, website, business papers, sales materials) as well as verbal (tagline, website content, social media tone, messaging) and even interactions customers have with your staff (greeting on phone, transaction with a bank teller, etc).

Your brand promise will ultimately serve as the connective thread for the expression of your brand. Creating a unique, yet unified presence across all platforms ensures that your audience builds confidence and trust through their various interactions with your brand.

Brand guidelines are another supportive document that are often used in tandem with the expression platform, which dictate brand and design standards for staff members to reference to ensure consistent, on-brand communications.

CONCLUSION

The importance of ‘Brand’ in the B2B space has become undeniable. That being said, it is essential to ensure an understanding of how a brand - and more importantly your brand - is defined. Focus first on understanding the industry, your competition, and your audience. From there, outline your core value points, identify a unique brand promise, and invest in a meaningful creative expression to fuel marketing and sales efforts.
ABOUT D+i CREATIVE

D+i specializes in designing contagious experiences which create worth for brands and digital products. We define and design brand strategy, brand identity, product packaging, user interfaces and user experiences. We work with companies and organizations who are growing, innovating, disrupting or evolving. They have the courage to challenge a market and differentiate.

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