

The Buzz About Branding

How branding can help define and improve your business.

Branding. It's one of today's hot business buzzwords and often attached to wonder companies like Starbucks, Apple and Nike. But branding isn't just for the megacompanies. In an increasingly competitive world, branding is equally important to small companies and even individuals in business. In fact, creating and carrying out a great brand is often easier for a small company than it is for a large corporation.

So, why is branding important for your facility? You may offer educated trainers and state-of-the-art classes. But are you a great brand? Why would anyone choose your facility over the club down the street?

Great branding can happen without hiring an expensive think tank or organizing focus groups. Branding comes from knowing what your business is about and making your business consistently known for what it's about. When I created Stroller Strides™, it was just a single class with a few moms in my neighborhood. But I created the brand from the start, and it has helped us grow into a national brand recognized by new moms. I always knew that I wanted it to be more than just a fitness class. I wanted it to be "support-group exercise," a place where moms could connect with other moms and get guidance and support through their motherhood journey. We have stuck by this philosophy and integrated it into our advertising, our staff training and our mission statement.

The Importance of Branding

Without branding, you risk being perceived by the customer as having a product that can be switched out for another, similar one. You don't want to be just another gym or offer just another indoor cycling class that can be swapped out

when a more convenient club or class comes around.

What makes a brand? Have you heard of a man named Scott Bedbury? Maybe not. But you almost certainly have heard of the products he has branded. He is the mastermind behind the branding of Starbucks and the "Just Do It" campaign for Nike. When Bedbury creates a brand, he creates a *feeling* for that product or company. When you think of Nike and Just Do It, you might feel that anyone can be an athlete by simply "going for it." When you drive a BMW, you might feel you are driving The Ultimate Driving Machine®, as the company's marketing suggests. Branding is more than just a slogan; it's a feeling that consumers tie to the company and its product.

The fitness industry has never been so competitive, and it's only going to increase. Standards for training and education are being raised to their highest levels; great fitness equipment is standard in most facilities; and customer service is widely recognized in every department as a must-have. So, how are you going to be different? How are you going to drive customers to your club? Too often, fitness companies take the easy way out and market *price*. That's rarely the right tactic, as it has the potential to escalate into a price war, thus shrinking profitability and perhaps even causing your facility to sacrifice quality. When it's done right, your customers and your employees know your brand and live it. Whether you are managing a department or a club, your brand should be a big part of your focus.

Developing Your Brand

Branding may be a hot area in marketing these days, but there's really nothing new about the concept. Branding is an umbrella term that describes a collection

of business basics, many of which are covered in this section. Note that branding is not a panacea; it would be naive to believe that you can simply develop a catchy name or slogan and expect your product to take off. You need thought and follow-through in each of the following categories:

Quality. It's hard to build any company without quality. Make sure your service, products and equipment are ones that clients can depend on.

Pricing. Within the scope of the competition, where does your pricing fall? Are you the Wal-Mart that promises the lowest price, or are you the Nordstrom that is not afraid to charge higher prices for exceptional service?

Positioning. The only thing better than being the first to do something is to be the largest. Okay, so you might not be the first club to offer an indoor cycling class, but are you the first in your city? Or are you the largest women's club in your state? If you can market your position, do so.

Customer Commitment. What is your commitment to your customer? Costco is becoming famous for its commitment to satisfy its customers. You can return virtually anything there without hassle. Today's customers value commitment, loyalty and a little personal service in a rather impersonal world.

Communication. How do you communicate your brand? The strength of your brand is built on the consistent actions of your employees. Often the head of the company knows the point of the brand, but sometimes this point is not well understood by the people who actually carry it out. Does your housekeeping staff understand your brand? Does the front-desk staff? You need buy-in and understanding across the board.

Marketing. What good is your message if people don't know about it? Once you identify your brand, get the word out. Make sure all of your marketing ties in to your brand. Be consistent in your message. Create something that can be remembered and will be talked about. Do you draw on emotion like Hallmark; is your focus on being memorable like Jack in the Box; or are you consistent like Target? All of these brands are well-thought-out and carried through.

"Feel." Truly, this is your brand. A brand is your gut feeling about a company. People will buy on emotion. Great brands like Harley-Davidson create customers who are evangelists for the company. They have pride and feel a personal tie-in to the brand. When creating your brand, think about what will evoke emotion.

Ready, Set, Brand!

Based on the basics discussed in this article, start examining and deciding who you are as a business. Define why you are in business. You can't be all things to all people. What do you want people to think of when they think of your company? The Curves® franchise has defined its brand very successfully. Most health clubs market to people who are already fit. Curves advertising clearly shows "real" women with more robust bodies. It makes their clients feel they will be welcome and will fit in.

What's in a Name? Your name is often integral to your brand. If possible, your name should tie in to the core of your business. When I created Stroller Strides, I chose the word *strides* not just

because we were a walking program. Our mission is that we help moms make strides in fitness, in motherhood and in life. Think about how your business name will look written, how it will be pronounced and what the first impression is when someone hears the name.

Create a Strong, Memorable Identity.

If you are successful with your brand, it can actually help you attract and retain employees as well as customers. Branding will not create instant revenue or a dramatic change in business. A brand takes time to develop and to be recognized. Be cautious not to switch out your philosophy just because you haven't seen a quick change or increase in business. Don't get caught up thinking that you need to create a brand that is recognized worldwide. Your goal is to create a strong, memorable identity within your community and your industry. Remember, your brand is as much for you as for the client. Once established, your brand will help you stay on course and true to your mission.

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How Important Is Branding?

Think of virtually any product or service you use, and recall how often you've made a purchasing decision based on a brand name. It's a rare customer who chooses the no-name product in a world swirling with multiple brands of coffees, cars, clothes, cleaning products, batteries and fitness facilities.

Not only can the right branding increase your business, but the *wrong* branding can hurt your business. If you go to Wal-Mart, you go because you know you'll get "always low prices." If you go to Avis, you know that they aren't number one but they "try harder." These companies live their brand.

Just as you can learn from successful brands, you can learn from the unsuccessful. Do you remember Incredible Universe? This was a chain of massive electronics stores that were popping up everywhere. They ultimately shut down because they tried to be too many things to too many people.

If there is any lesson here, it's that you should stay true to your brand!