

Ask SCORE

I've run a successful secretarial service business for a number of years. I think I understand marketing and do a fair amount to promote my business, but recently I keep hearing about "branding." What exactly is branding and how do I do it?

A great product or first-class service is seldom enough to sustain a lasting impression among your customers. In today's competitive market, a great branding strategy will help ensure that customers remember your business as the "go-to" source for their needs.

A branding strategy includes your company's name, logo, symbols, website and other tools that define your small business in the minds of consumers and, perhaps more importantly, differentiates it from others providing the same products or services in your target market. According to marketing experts such as Laura Ries, president of the Atlanta-based Ries & Ries marketing firm, branding and marketing go hand-in-hand.

"If you can build a powerful brand you will have a powerful marketing program," Ries says. "If you can't, then all the advertising, fancy packaging, sales promotions and PR in the world won't help you succeed."

Almost anything can be branded, including you. But branding is complex and involves the customer's total experience with you, your product or your service. The most effective branding combines both online and off-line elements. The Web offers tremendous opportunities for promoting your brand, through low-cost search engine ads or interactive features on your website.

Keep in mind that the best brands tend to tap emotions and appeal to a person's natural need for involvement. Be original in identifying your brand identity—the thing that truly sets your small business apart. Everybody touts quality and service, for example, so look for something that's really different. If you are having trouble pinpointing a branding message, try asking your customers what they need from you the most. Then base your brand on that.

Your brand should also last a long time, so avoid elements or catch phrases linked to trends likely to disappear or become outdated. Simplicity is also a virtue in your branding message. Buyers are overwhelmed by excess information. Too much information confuses your brand message.

A number of resources can help you understand and craft a sound branding strategy, including *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding* by market guru Al Ries and daughter Laura. Peter Montoya's *The Brand Called You* offers ideas and advice on how entrepreneurs can promote themselves, personally, as a brand. Australian branding expert Martin Lindstrom also offers an extensive library of branding articles on his website, www.martinlindstrom.com.

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