

TAKING ACTION on BRAND

BY MARK GIBSON

*Marketing Strategist, Consulting CMO,
and Executive Coach*



Defining “brand” and knowing how to put it into action can sometimes seem overwhelming.

For insurance agents in particular, questions you may often find yourself asking include:

- ❓ *How do I invest my limited resources wisely in creating distinctive and effective communications?*
- ❓ *How do I put a personal stamp on a business whose corporate parent has already spent millions of dollars establishing their brand?*
- ❓ *How do I foster ongoing positive word of mouth, given that most of my communications with leads are transactional and limited to a single interaction?*
- ❓ *How do I serve my customers better when I know relatively little about them?*
- ❓ *What is “brand” anyway... and how is it different from general marketing or just running a financially successful operation?*

Getting started

A good place to start when thinking about brand is the following definition from marketing guru [Seth Godin](#):



A BRAND IS the set of **expectations, memories, stories** and **relationships** that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another. If the consumer (whether it’s a business, a buyer, a voter or a donor) doesn’t pay a premium, make a selection or spread the word, then no brand value exists for that consumer.

Note that all these words—**expectations, memories, stories, relationships**—relate to the human aspects of running a business. A brand is no more than just that: understanding how human beings process information and form connections, and then using that understanding to propel your business forward.

Getting the human side of your business right not only feels good but can be worth serious money. [A recent research report](#) found that 80% of the value of American S&P 500 companies came not from financial or physical capital, but how well they aligned human activity inside and outside the company.

A brand is not just an addition to your business, it’s a multiplier.

Creating your brand, from outside-in and inside-out

Whether your agency is new, growing, attached to a parent company, or on its own, taking action on your brand is fairly straightforward.

1. First, be clear on who you are targeting. No brand appeals to everyone. Who are you trying to reach?

Who is your customer?

Demographic details: *Where are they located, how old are they, what is their gender, economic status and living situation?*

Psychographic details: *What do they want? What are their values?*

Occasions: *What life events or marketing triggers drive new prospects to contact you, or vice versa?*

Categories: *What do people typically expect from the kind of service you offer? Do you meet or exceed their general expectations? If you're different in any significant way from what they expect, is there a way to spin that difference as a positive?*

2. Then, be clear about the unique value you provide.

Beyond the specific products or services you sell (the features), what is the emotional and functional benefit you provide? How is that benefit different from and better than what your target customers can find elsewhere?

Every benefit involves either reducing a negative or adding a positive. **For example, do you:**

- Save customers more money
- Treat them with more respect
- Save more of their time
- Lighten their day
- Charm them with humor
- Make a big hassle go away
- Communicate more honestly and straightforwardly
- Have the fastest claim response time
- Think about their whole family and long-term needs
- “Get” their unique situation
- Humbly and transparently share all available options
- Make them feel in control
- Make them feel cared for
- Seem smarter and more “on the ball”
- Speak their language

All of the above benefits are possible, but no business can excel at every single one. I often tell people: “You can do anything—but not everything.”

So ask yourself what specific functional and emotional benefits your customers are looking for that you have a special knack for providing.

Distill this to a short list, or even better, a single phrase or sentence. This is your “value proposition” or what some call a “**brand promise**”—the pact you make with your customers. Keep some form of this front and center in your marketing materials so customers know right away whether the two of you are a good match, and what to expect from you.

Good examples of brand promises:

THE RITZ-CARLTON

“Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen”

asana:

“Teamwork without email”



“If you have a body, you’re an athlete”

Google

“Organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”



“Think different.”

If your value proposition has already been defined by a corporate parent or legacy business you’ve inherited, then customer expectations about you have already been set.

If this is your situation, think of new ways you can live up to and deliver on the value proposition that’s already been established. For example, if your corporate parent’s brand story involves being easy to work with, how can you make your customers’ experience of working with you as easy as possible? If you’re inheriting a business that has had a particularly strong track record selling to seniors, how can you maintain that, while at the same time bringing new energy and ideas?

3. Define and emphasize the personality traits that make you effective

Many people think that a great brand is all about a great logo and clever marketing copy. But humans aren’t that gullible. We take in the entire experience, form an impression, and then rationally check to see if the surface details match. If you hate white chocolate and see a box of white chocolate at the grocery store with beautiful packaging and a memorable name, you’ll still just walk on by. No amount of beautiful design will make a difference.

The good news is that you don't necessarily need to spend oodles of money on design to have a strong brand.

I'll use another example to illustrate the point. I go to a small gym in my neighborhood a few times a week. The proprietor is very friendly, the selection of equipment is small but adequate, the space is clean, the staff smart and knowledgeable. It's walking distance from my house, which for me is a blessing since it saves me valuable time every day. The monthly rates aren't cheap, but they're reasonable. Overall, for me this is a great experience. The logo for the gym is not that pretty, and their name is forgettable, but just the same, I have been and will continue to be a loyal customer for years.

Before worrying about words and visuals, it pays to think about the tone you set for customers with your personality and your behaviors.

To create a consistent and effective brand personality, start by asking yourself what personality traits make you most effective in your role. These might not be the things about yourself that you value most—the lens we're using is what matters most to your customers.

If you have a corporate parent, what traits or "brand attributes" do they emphasize in their advertising and marketing? Are they known for being funny, authentic, wise, etc.?

Sometimes it's a struggle to maintain a consistent and effective personality. We all have our off days. You might be personable... unless you're irritated. Or a clear communicator... until you're tired. But it's important for your brand personality to stay consistent. You want your prospects and customers to have a singular impression of you so that the buzz around your business is both positive and specific.

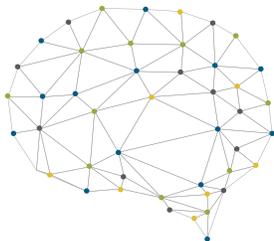
If you see ways in which you might slip out of the personality that's most effective for your business, create reminders or action plans that can help you play your role most effectively. For example, if you tend to speak too quickly when you're enthusiastic, create reminders to breathe and speak slowly. If you're lacking some subject matter expertise that will help you appear to be more knowledgeable, make time to get some training or do some extra reading.

4. Ritualize behaviors

A brand is a relationship, and most relationships tend to be ritualized: the family dinner, the Amazon 1-click check-out, the Apple product launch. Rituals don't have to be a big deal... I used to see a massage therapist who gave each of her clients an organic apple at the end of each session. It was a sweet and simple gesture that made me a happier client and only cost her 80 cents. **Smart marketing.**

Ask yourself what short list of key behaviors can bring your brand promise to life, and then commit to them.

5. Use consistent words and visuals.



Finally, think about words and visuals.

Human brains are extremely sharp pattern recognizers: when we see a familiar logo or tagline or image, it connects in our brains to every previous experience we've had.

If you have a corporate parent, it's important to use their brand assets prominently and consistently so that your customers connect you to the many encounters with the brand they've already had.

If you own your own business, pay attention to the concision, memorability, and consistency of your communications, and make sure your words and visuals match your brand promise and personality. E.g., an earthworm with googly eyes and a beret might be a memorable logo, but it may not be right for your business.

Resist the urge to change things up too often. News should feel, well, “new” but the background personality of your business should stay reasonably consistent. Brands like Coca-Cola or Target or Wal-Mart evolve over time, occasionally refining their logo or tagline or brand promise, but they never lose their essence.

The journey ahead

Running a business is an exciting journey, and one that takes many steps.

Know that small businesses typically go through the following stages of building their brand:

- **Fast start** - Impulsive or “from the hip” thinking about brand; spending a bit too much or a bit too little and hoping for the best
- **Smooth sailing** - Everything seems to be working—why change?
- **First “uh oh”** - Something not's clicking. Leads dry up. You start being jealous of a competitor. You spend too much of your time thinking about your website without taking definitive action.
- **Investing in systems** - You pause and begin developing a sustainable and scalable brand infrastructure for your business, using the techniques described above.
- **Calibrating the systems** - Some of the ideas you try work, and some don't. You treat each one as an experiment, and double-down on the ones with the most upside.
- **Deepening the systems** - At this point, you're a brand pro. You understand intuitively how to create value and build relationships with customers through tone, personality, behaviors, visuals, and content. You're ready to expand your reach or further tune your systems to create even more differentiated value.

Happy trails.

About us & how to get in touch



Mark Gibson is a brand and marketing strategist, consulting CMO, and executive coach. His past clients include Sundance Channel, eBay, Leapfrog Toys, Zazzle, and Art Center College of Design. He is the founder of The Next Us.



insuranceQuotes is the complete insurance comparison shopping site for consumers and the premier customer acquisition platform for insurance agents and carriers.

Our mission is to demystify the insurance shopping experience, so that shoppers can simply and easily find the coverage that's right for them, and providers can inform, educate and secure new customers through a marketplace that's comprehensive and trusted.

www.insuranceQuotes.com

sales@insurancequotes.com

1860 Blake Street, Suite 900

Denver, CO 80202