

Top 9 Ways to Brand On-line by Bob Baker

1. Define your brand up front.

When visitors arrive at your web site, let them know immediately what you do and why they should care. Far too many web sites shroud their identity in flashy graphics and ambiguous slogans without telling people what the company or person actually does. View your Web site through the eyes of a new visitor. Does it spell out exactly what your brand stands for? If not, redesign it so your purpose and identity are unmistakable

2. Lead with what you do, not who you are.

It may defy logic, but making your company name the most visible element on your home page may not be the most effective way to reinforce your brand. A Web-based or e-mail marketing message should state a benefit right off the bat. Which of these paints a clearer identity: The business name "Dog Owner Central" displayed in large letters or the more specific description "Training tips for busy dog owners"?

3. Use a real person as a figure head.

The online world can be a cold, mechanical place. Your branding efforts are more effective when you add a recognizable, consistent human element. Think of the way Dave Thomas promoted Wendy's. If your company has a CEO or spokesperson who is closely identified with the company offline, make sure that connection carries to the cyberworld. If you run a business by yourself, by all means, put your name, photo and personal message on your web site. Nothing creates mystery and distrust more than a site that is void of a human contact and asks visitors to send e-mail to the "webmaster."

4. Develop a fan-club mentality.

Most online marketers try to generate readers, visitors or users. I encourage you to switch gears and create fans. "Users" are people who visit your web site, subscribe to your newsletter or buy your products and services. "Fans," on the other hand, cheer you on, rave about you to their friends and eagerly follow everything you do. Which would you rather have?

5. Make good use of words.

Verbal content is not only king, it's the entire kingdom. Even though designers try to squeeze as much graphic impact as they can out of limited bandwidths, what matters most online are the words you use. I don't buy into the less-is-more, bullet-point mentality of writing for the web. To create fans online, you must deliver useful brand-related information and speak to readers in a conversational tone. If it takes more than one or two scrolling screens to do that, so be it.

6. Make sure visual elements reinforce your identity.

While words are important, the look of your Web site must also support your brand image. Is your brand best served by hard edges or softer, rounded shapes? Do primary colors capture your personality or would earth tones be a better match? Find the design scheme that best compliments your identity.

7. Become a one-stop destination.

Let's say your company sells unicorn-themed knick-knacks, posters and greeting cards. You might simply post an online catalog and a few profiles of your products. However, a far better approach would be to set up your site as a clearing house for all things unicorn-related -- articles on the history of unicorns, personal stories from customers who have been touched by their unicorn possessions, unicorn-related photo galleries and message boards, etc. Your online presence should establish you as the primary resource in your field.

8. Publish an e-mail newsletter.

Having a brand-centered web site is great, but you must rely on people taking it upon themselves to visit it. Offering a free e-mail newsletter allows you to build a database of subscribers who are specifically interested in what your brand represents. Best yet, being able to deliver your message by e-mail puts you in control of the frequency with which your audience is exposed to your brand. Repetition is crucial. To generate subscribers, place a newsletter sign-up form on every page of your site.

9. Be visible through online forums.

Small business owners should also regularly post to online forums, such as message boards and discussion lists widely read by people likely to be attracted to the brand. If your area of expertise caters to motorcycle enthusiasts, make sure you offer useful information -- not just a sales pitch -- in the places where motorcycle enthusiasts gather.