

## **Building a Strong Brand** – Published in *Dermascope* March 2005

When we think of branding, we immediately think of big, national companies – companies with a lot of marketing muscle that have the ability to dominate broadcast and print media. But is branding just for the big guys? Of course not, branding is important for every business, including your own. Whether you're an esthetician working alone or a multi-operator day spa or salon, the importance of building and promoting a strong brand cannot be underestimated.

### **Why You Need to Promote Your Brand**

What is a brand? In its most narrow definition, a brand is a name, symbol or design that is used to identify and differentiate goods and services. In a broader sense, your brand is a lot more. According to Frank Delano, author of the *The OmniPowerful Brand*, a brand is represented by the salesperson explaining the product to the buyer; the guarantee or warranty behind the product; the service support; the promise behind the brand; and even the contractual handshake.

Your brand represents both the tangible and intangible value perceived by your customers. A well conceived brand has a distinct personality, forms a lasting impression, and makes an emotional connection with the customer.

Branding has huge benefits for both the skin and the customer. For the skin center owner, branding helps identify products and services, making promotion efforts easier, encouraging repeat purchases. A strong brand is more resilient to price competition allowing you to charge a premium price for products and services. Additionally, a powerful brand promotes customer loyalty and facilitates brand extension (new products, services, locations, franchises, etc.).

For customers, brands identify products and services and are generally associated with a level of quality and reliability, thereby lessening the risk of purchasing decisions. This saves the consumer time and emotional energy during the evaluation process.

### **Developing Your Brand Strategy**

Developing a brand strategy is a critical part of establishing your company identity. Your brand identity must be communicated consistently across different media over the life of your business. Your brand message should resonate with you target market and mirror their customs and values.

The steps involved in brand strategy development are: defining your brand, creating a brand statement, setting objectives, and establishing an action plan to carry out those objectives.

### **Defining Your Brand**

This is the foundational step in building a brand strategy. Define the personality and/or heritage of your brand. For instance, does your center offer trend setting treatments or cater to a specific niche market? Does the word "chic" describe your product offering and/or service menu? Is yours the oldest, most established day spa in the area?

Define the qualities associated with your products and services. Describe the core value of your company and characterize the promise behind the brand.

Who are your primary customers? What are their values and interests? Where do they live? How will you reach them and how will you attract them to your brand? How will you keep them loyal to your products and services? How do you intend to "Wow" them and turn them into brand devotees?

Move on to your competitors. Gain insight into their brands, particularly the thrust of their marketing campaigns. What is their relative strength? Have they achieved a dominant market position?

Describe your product and service mix. Do you serve a niche market? What do you do exceptionally well? What sets you apart from competitors? Why do people do business with you? Is it price, quality, or unique products and services? What about location, hours of operation, or even your return policy? What is your Unique Selling Proposition?

By answering these questions, you'll have created a brand profile that can be used in all your marketing communications. Craft a brand positioning statement underscoring your core competencies. Be sure to differentiate your business from your competitors and load your positioning statement with the key benefits important to your customers.

### **Set Brand Objectives and Action Plan**

Define measurable objectives and apply specific timelines to each. For instance, if your objective is to establish yourself as a leading authority on skin care in your community, you may want to schedule lectures at professional gatherings or present topics of interests to local women's groups. If public speaking isn't your thing, then perhaps you'd like to contribute informative articles to your local newspaper. If your objective is to cement customer loyalty, why not institute an incentive program featuring discounts, points or rewards?

The key to developing your brand strategy is to be as concise as possible with your goals and to create an action plan specifying the "what, when, and how" you will accomplish those goals.

### **Marketing a Service Brand**

Marketing a service is challenging, because by its very nature, a service is intangible and harder to assess than a product, which has physical attributes. Very often, service marketers differentiate their business from competitors by emphasizing experience, expertise, and professionalism. But don't stop there. People choose personal services on the basis of feelings, emotions, and trust. Play up the emotional impact of your services.

When marketing your service brand, pay close attention to your biggest brand asset, your employees. As treatment providers, they represent your brand, including its message, promise, and personality. They not only face the customer, they literally touch the customer and communicate your message more intimately than any other service industry.

All your employees have to be on board and communicate their individual expertise, knowledge, and their commitment to service. They have to buy into the brand statement and actually live the brand, both during work and on their own time.

The impression clients receive from your employees (including front desk staff) influences their opinion about your brand. Therefore, it's incumbent upon you to hire people who represent the philosophy behind your brand. According to Ian Buckingham, of Interbrand Inside, "Employees bring a brand to life; they are its ultimate custodians."

### **Brand Packaging**

Brand packaging extends beyond your logo, stationary, business card, and brochure. Brand packaging is all about your image and making a statement about your company. That statement should be consistent on every piece of outgoing mail (print and electronic) including promotions,

sales offers, thank you cards, holiday greetings, business correspondence, your website, and even email. Hint: don't use [myspa@yahoo.com](mailto:myspa@yahoo.com) as your email address! It looks unprofessional.

Make sure each piece of mail is checked for grammar and spelling errors. If you don't think people care about those things, think again.

### Media Selection and Branding

Keep your brand strong by distributing media buys over those that deliver the highest return on your investment (ROI). Your marketing strategy should take into account your objectives, target market, budget, and what has worked for you in the past. Do your homework regarding local media buying because each market varies widely making cost comparisons difficult.

Here are some tips to control the cost of media spending and to take the frenzy out of the buying experience.

1. Plan your media advertising well in advance.
2. Keep records of response rates.
3. Negotiate the best deal possible and ask about frequency discounts.
4. Find out if rates fluctuate seasonally.
5. Negotiate for ad placement in magazines and newspapers.
6. Specify day parts for radio advertising.
7. Choose specific local and cable programs that appeal to your target audience.

### Media Type: Pros and Cons

Media	Advantages	Disadvantages	Market Reach
Newspapers	Established shopping medium, timing flexibility, "couponing", ad size flexibility.	Short shelf life, poor reproduction quality. Easy for prospects to ignore.	High local reach but no targeting.
Magazines	Choose regional publications for target marketing, longer shelf life, high quality printing, ad size flexibility.	Ad can be costly, long lead time.	Check circulation.
Radio	Short lead time for scheduling, target by format, mobile (car, office, home)	Not visual, message may be "lost" during cluttered commercial breaks, hard to track.	Extremely high local reach depending on broadcast station, day time.
Television	High reach capability, target by program. Local or cable offer best rates.	High production costs (especially for network), long lead time.	Large number of consumers but a small target audience.
Direct Mail	Can use any development style and delivery frequency. Most personal medium, precise geographic targeting. Can measure response rate.	Demographic targeting difficult, low response rates. High cost per response.	Limited only by budget.
Outdoor	24 hr. exposure, geographic selectivity, localized message, relatively low cost.	Fairly high production cost, long lead time, hard to make changes, weather issues.	Broad reach in local market but not targeted.
Yellow Pages	Established medium, high reach capability, moderate cost, long life.	Long lead time, long commitment, poor reproduction quality.	Extremely wide reach.
Internet	Low upfront cost, control over your message, audience, reach. Creative can be changed instantly, targeted geographically. Track responses.	Potential for deception in ads, dial up slow, range of cost vary dramatically.	Extremely wide reach, highly targeted.

Always evaluate your media buys to determine their effectiveness. Were your objective met? Did you reach your sales goals? Did you receive the projected number of inquiries?

If you were unhappy with your advertising campaign, do your best to objectively find out how you can improve on the next go-around. Was it your creative that fell short, your offer, or perhaps you chose the wrong media vehicle? If you were successful, roll that success into the next advertising campaign.

### **Qualities of Great Brand Advertising:**

1. Keep a brand focus: your ad must sell the brand as well as the product or service.
2. Your ad should capture the brand's most compelling story.
3. Use your brand theme line in all media seen by the public.
4. Demonstrate how your service is superior.
5. Make your ad believable.

### **Promoting Your Brand on the Internet**

The Internet has proven to be an invaluable resource for brand promotion. According to eMarketer's report, *eBusiness in 2003*, the number one objective of online marketing is to "build and reinforce brand awareness as well as positively impact consumer attitudes about products and services."

Use your website to build trust and credibility with your visitors so they feel confident about purchasing from you. The Internet gives salon owners an opportunity to expand their brand with no additional storefront payments, sales personnel, furniture or equipment.

The Internet levels the playing field, allowing small salons to compete with more established day spas or those with larger budgets. Advantages include huge savings in the areas of printing and distribution, production costs (for radio and television ads), and operating margins. With its unlimited market reach, it makes sense for every salon to use the Internet as part of their marketing communication and brand promotion strategy.

### **Other Low Cost Ways to Promote Your Brand**

**Co-branding** is a powerful way to bring attention to your business. By linking your brand with another successful brand in your area, you'll put your brand in the spotlight with a winner. Most small salons won't be able to link their business with a famous personality, but you can link to complimentary, established business such as a local inn or B&B. For example, you can team up to offer a "Couples get-away" featuring a one-night stay at the inn and a one of your luxurious spa packages.

**Buddy marketing** can be a great way to extend your brand. For instance, if you have a "buddy arrangement" with the inn used in the last example, when someone calls for a brochure, you'll mail both brochures instead of just one. Think of it this way, when someone is visiting from out of town, they are looking for things to do and ways to relax. You're providing them with valuable information at almost no cost to yourself. It's a win-win situation for everyone.

**Sponsor or co-sponsoring an event:** draw people into your salon by selling tickets for the event at your front desk. You can do this for concerts, walkathons, and charitable events. Keep plenty of brochures and business cards in plain view. If selling tickets is too much of a distraction for your business, at least your name will be on the list of sponsors. You may even get some free radio publicity.

**Networking and referrals** from other businesses or customers is a great way to improve your business. Don't be shy about asking for the referral.

**Write articles** for your local newspaper or for online publications such as "e-zines" and newsletters. They provide a great way to establish your credibility and promote your business.

**Internet forums** allow you to post comments and offer advice. Find beauty forums where you can establish your credibility as an expert in your field. Although advertising is prohibited, you can include your signature file with each posting.

**"Free gift with purchase"** is a long standing tradition for the beauty industry. Try giving away a small, inexpensive gift as an added incentive to promote your brand and good will among customers.

**Display your brand on tee shirts, polo shirts, etc.** Promote your brand while you're not working by wearing your branded clothing. For instance, if you belong to a walking club or gym, wear your salon tee shirt during exercise.

**Offer a guarantee.** The guarantee behind the brand goes a long way to insure consumer confidence. Are you confident enough about your products and services to offer a guarantee?

**Give customers more than they expect.** All the little things you do for your clients add up to a big brand statement. Impress your clients. Never do anything second rate.

## Summary

Make it a point to establish an emotional connection to your customers and prospects. To keep your salon in the hearts and minds of customers they need to see you as the *only* solution to their skin care concerns. Find out who your customer is and create a space that caters to their every need. Although it's highly unlikely that you'll ever become a household name in America, it is very possible for you to obtain notoriety in your community. Sure your customers can go to destination spas and receive quality services, by why would they want to when they have you right in their own back yard?

And remember, your brand is more than an image, it's a statement about your credibility, values, and expertise. Develop a strategy consistent with the personality and characteristics behind the brand. Establish trust and brand recognition by using every piece of marketing communications to reinforce your brand message and watch your customer base and profits soar.