

Branding—it's not just for the BIG GUYS: Build a brand The Five Step Branding Pyramid

By Edward (Ted) Byers

Practical Decisions

When you think of successful brands, what immediately comes to mind? Perhaps it's your favorite soft drink or automobile, or maybe it's a restaurant, or a line of clothing.

Based on personal interests and where you live, your responses may vary, but all of us experience brands everyday. We buy them, we drive them, and we wear them. The brands you are loyal to have built their identities to a point where they evoke an immediate mental and emotional response when you hear their name. That is the ultimate goal of branding.... having the consumer bond with your brand.

Almost everyone and everything has a brand in the eyes of the consumer. Everything you do, from marketing, to how you interact with customers, creates and forms your brand. For example, think of the Gap. When you see its ads in print or on television, you get a feel for the store. And when you visit the store, it's a seamless experience. The impression first introduced in the advertisements is carried out in the retail environment.

The same branding strategy that works for Coca-Cola, Nike, BMW and Godiva Chocolate can work for you without the expensive price tag.

The Branding Pyramid

Branding is a series of steps or levels that a product or company must go through with each individual consumer. Think of the levels as a pyramid with the first level being "PRESENCE:" creating a presence in the mind of the consumer.

Most organizations can create a presence through advertising, signage, events, public relations, contests, sponsorships, trade shows, referral programs and more. Basically, it means creating awareness, letting your market know you exist.

The second level is "RELEVANCE." If your products and services are not relevant to the needs and aspirations of the potential buyer, it's not going to matter how great they are. For example, as a consumer, if design and personal service are most important to me in a purchasing decision, and you advertise only on price, I won't go any further in the branding process with your offering. I will continue looking for an offering/brand that matches more closely with my values.

The third level is "**PERFORMANCE.**" For any brand to be successful it must live up to its claims and deliver the intended benefits.

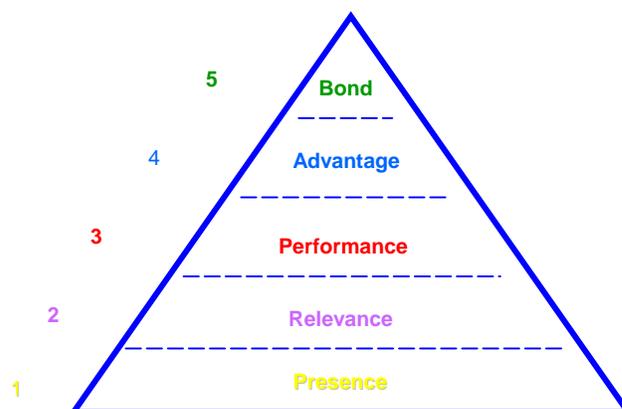
If you promise a customer her order will be ready on Tuesday and it's not ready until Saturday, or if you advertise an experienced staff, and the customer is met by an untrained employee, what has happened? The customer is not only left feeling disappointed, but the brand also has failed in the performance stage.

So if a brand has made it this far by creating a presence, showing it's products and services are relevant and performing based on the expectations set through marketing, the fourth level is "**ADVANTAGE.**"

To create brand awareness, your company and its offering must have an advantage, real or perceived, over the competition. It is essential to correctly identify who your true competition is—it is not always, or solely, the obvious organization you run into very week.

Think about your favorite brand. What advantage does it bring over a competing brand? It might offer better service, higher quality, unique design or something more intangible, like a good feeling. Regardless of whether you choose to build your brand on service, quality, or something more intangible, it must be competitive, or within a level acceptable to your target customers, in other areas. For example, if you choose to compete on price, your service and reliability have to deliver a reasonable level of performance as well. If they don't, your target customer may not see the value in your offering.

The fifth and ultimate step in branding is "**BOND.**" It is the brand's ability to bond with its customers that ensures loyalty in the future. Ultimately, a successful brand will forge a special relationship with the customer. The relationship began when the customers first became aware of the brand, which was the presence stage. Next the consumer became acquainted with the brand through the relevance and performance stages. Then she experienced the brand's advantages first-hand and finally moves into being bonded with the brand. Being bonded with a brand means it's the first brand, and in many cases, the only brand to be considered when purchasing. We would all like for our businesses to be in that category.



I'm sure you already have this type of bond with many of your customers. If you think about your best customers, think of how long they've been with you, and how you respond to their needs. Think of how they purchase and how they refer people to you.

As a big picture view, it's helpful to keep the branding pyramid in mind as you interact with customers. Try to determine where they are in the branding process. Are they new customers who are just learning of you in the market, or long-term customers who come back again and again? This approach will help you focus on what's most important to them at this stage in the branding process, and will move them closer to bonding with you and your company.

Maintaining and Strengthening Your Brand

Once you bond with the consumer, you've won, right? Not exactly! I wish it were that simple. Like most things in life, branding is a journey, not a destination.

In business, your reputation, your brand awareness and your overall success depend on consistent, customer-by-customer follow-through, and staying in tune with the needs of your *target* customers. Ask your current customers (don't guess) what's important, and build your business around what's relevant to them.

If you are clear on the brand you want to create for your organization--what you want to be known for--and communicate that in everything you do, from advertising to employee training to marketing and sales, then over time, you will bond with your customers and create a strong base of business for growth. It's important to constantly strengthen your brand, focusing on and strengthening each level of the brand pyramid.