

How consumers make or break your brand.

Understanding the role consumers play in your brand.

You may feel your brand is right where it needs to be. Or, your business could be in the process of making a significant change that will require a rebrand to set you on the right track. Either way, it's important to ask yourself (and members of your team) the role your consumers play in your future. Have you given them a seat at the table, and are you inviting them to participate?

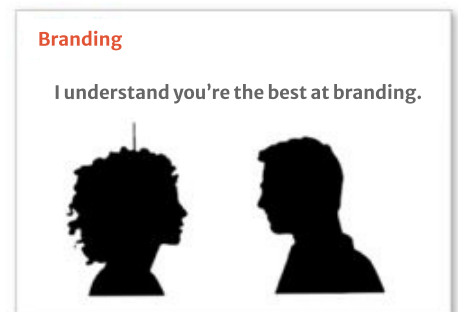
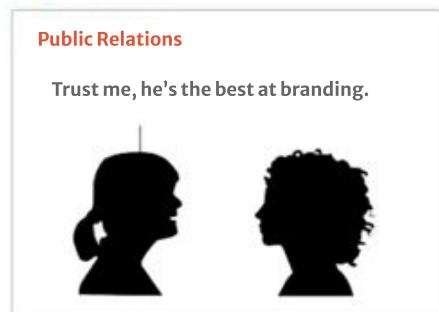
The following is an exploration of the role consumers play in your brand and how you can keep the lines of communication open to build trust.

What they say about you matters most.

First, it's important to define branding as the perceptions consumers have of your business. What they say you are (especially when you're not in the room), is your brand. You can try to guide the conversation but in today's connected world, a majority of the control is in the hands of the people.

The graphic below illustrates who leads the conversation between consumers and companies. Understanding the purpose of each can help you set expectations and shape strategies that elevate your efforts in all four.

In marketing efforts, the organization is providing information about what it creates and offers to its audience. Advertising takes this a step further and focuses on consistent messaging to help build retention in consumers' minds. In public relations, the conversation changes slightly as the message is no longer coming from your business, rather someone else is sharing your message on your behalf. Lastly, branding flips the conversation entirely. Branding is the audience sharing your story and their experience with others. To create a strong presence in the marketplace, you need all four of these elements. However, establishing the right brand strategy is imperative to enduring over time.



Source: ZAG, by Marty Neumier

Clearly articulate the behaviors and beliefs that drive your decisions.

A strong brand strategy has several key elements. However, all too often the values of a business are treated as an afterthought or are given very little thought. Yet these are the things that create a direct link to your customers. What you care most about and look for in employees are the same things that will draw the right consumer in. More and more people are looking for and want to buy from businesses that stand for something and that share the same values and beliefs they do. Consumers are more intentional about buying from like-minded companies.

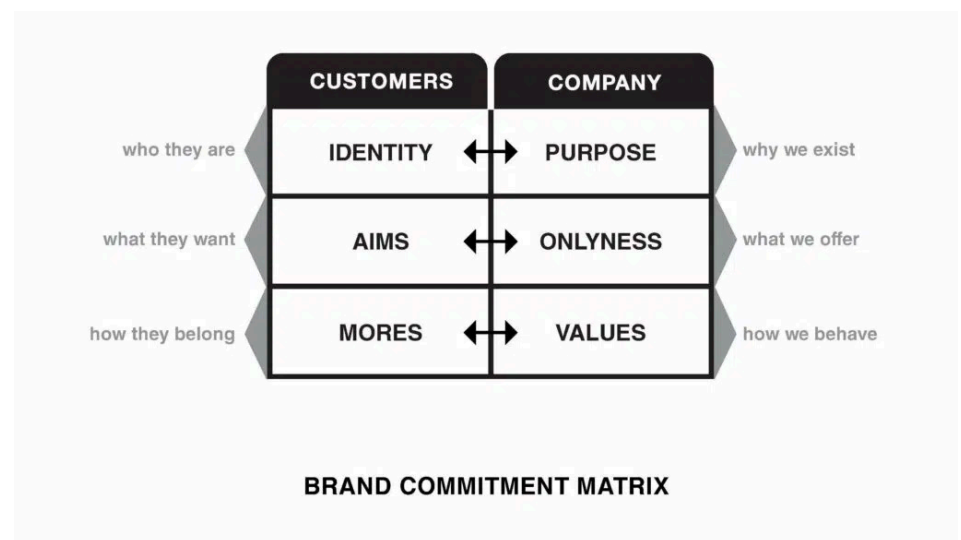
During the rebranding process, we guide leaders and internal teams through exercises that help them discover their true values. It's not uncommon to hear "integrity" or "people first" in these conversations, however, at this point they carry very little meaning with customers. We dig deeper during these sessions to uncover what these words and phrases actually mean within the company. Does "integrity" really mean transparency—as a leader you believe in giving staff an inside look at how decisions are made and that translates to empowering them to share deeper insights with customers? Your values should be defined specifically to your organization and written in a way that resonates with internal and external audiences.

We strongly encourage leaders to bring in a variety of stakeholders to help identify the true values of the business. Talking through the behaviors that are actually rewarded and those that drive decisions help companies determine if their focus is where it should be and if it's truly authentic. Knowing what matters most and standing behind that through employee recognition programs, hiring practices, and other areas of the business will further strengthen the relationship between employer and employee, as well as brand to audience.

Do your customers give a damn about your values?

You've uncovered and polished the values driving your business and employees. Now the question becomes: do your customers care about the same things? At this point in your brand strategy, it's necessary to take a closer look at your existing audience(s) and determine if what you believe to be important carries the same weight in their minds. Do they live by the same set of values?

If you're able, this is a good time to bring in focus groups or conduct other forms of research that give your customers an opportunity to either confirm your values or show areas of misalignment. Rather than try to reinvent your values to fit their needs, consider other groups of people who might believe in them. The Brand Commitment Matrix below is often used as an exercise to help leaders link their brand to an audience in a meaningful way. This is also a tool used in rebranding to help determine new opportunities for expanding or shifting a brand's customer base. When you create a connection at this level, your brand has a better chance of building trust and a long-term relationship with the consumers who will be excited to tell others about you and what you stand for.



Source: *The Brand Flip*, by Marty Neumier

A few examples of brands who have harnessed the power of their values to attract employees and customers alike include Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia. While you immediately think of ice cream when you hear "Ben & Jerry's" the brand remains focused on a bigger picture. The company's values are centered on: "advancing human rights and dignity, supporting social and economic justice for historically marginalized communities, and protecting and restoring the Earth's natural systems". While the company produces incredibly good ice cream, their actions are driven by bigger, more meaningful ideals. The company provides grant funding to support these values, empower employees to choose where these dollars are spent, and they're actively working toward minimizing the company's carbon footprint.

Patagonia is possibly a more visible example of values at work. The brand was built on a love for the outdoors and minimalist lifestyle. This has translated into decisions such as recycled fashion, funding projects that support environmental challenges, and more. It's nearly impossible to see a Patagonia product without immediately thinking about their work in protecting the planet.



Ben & Jerry's Values

Written more as categories rather than conversational statements, the brand supports each of these with more elaborate definitions and examples on the website and in marketing. While writing values in this way can add an extra step to link meaning between the brand and consumers, the company's history and commitment to these beliefs eliminates that concern.

- Human Rights & Dignity
- Social & Economic Justice
- Environmental Protection, Restoration and Regeneration



Patagonia

Its values are written to reflect the brand's personality and more directly tie into what customers believe in. This method is ideal for newer companies because it has a human, easily relatable feel.

- Build the best product
- Cause no unnecessary harm
- Use business to protect nature
- Not bound by convention

What matters is that companies stay true to their values and find audiences that fit naturally into this space versus trying to force values that aren't currently true to who you are in an effort to gain a certain customer. Saying you are something you aren't will hurt your brand in the long run.

Allow your audience to take the lead.

You've identified and clearly articulated your core values in a way that aligns with your audience. In some ways, that's the easy part. Putting your brand into the hands of consumers and letting go (to a certain degree) is often the hardest for leaders to embrace.

Your brand strategy will provide tools to help you guide the conversation but your actions combined with advertising, marketing and public relations will ultimately create the customer experience—the content that will be expressed in a variety of platforms. Brands have an opportunity to invite consumers into their world through social media, your website, in-person experiences and others. Before adopting all of the possible ways people can talk about your brand, consider what methods best reflect your brand strategy and which are most meaningful to your audience.

Netflix uses highly intentional personalization of its platform to empower consumers. Sephora focuses heavily on gaining customer feedback and being transparent about how the company utilizes the information to make changes and improve. Other brands have invested heavily in chatbots and other engagement technology to connect online and give customers a voice. All of these strategies are focused on elevating the customer experience which often translates to positive comments across review sites, social media platforms and we can't ignore the power of word-of-mouth marketing.

Look for ways to extend an invitation for them to participate and create a two-way conversation, meaning, if you ask them to comment on your Instagram account, have the right processes and people in place to reciprocate. Staying engaged on review sites is another way your brand can interact with customers to enhance their experience and show that you're listening and interested in supporting them. Consider how you're connecting with consumers and look for ways to integrate your brand purpose and values, and demonstrate your appreciation for their attention and loyalty.

Recognizing the power consumers have in branding is imperative to building a meaningful and enduring brand.

This begins with your brand strategy and finding ways to link who are and what you stand for with the people who will care the most. Consider their values, behaviors and wants and be intentional in how you invite them to the table.

The reality is, word of mouth continues to trump all forms of marketing and advertising. Brands have the power to influence the words your customer chooses to hold as “truth” about you and how they share it with family, friends, neighbors and coworkers. The tools you can use to influence them are found in all of your brand touchpoints. Weave your values and how they resonate with your audiences in these spaces and you have a stronger ability to help shape what your brand becomes in theirs (and others) hearts and minds.



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