

## The Top 10 Branding Mistakes Entrepreneurs Make

When you’re growing your own business, every error you make means money out of your pocket, so why learn the hard – and expensive – way? Why not learn ahead of time which pitfalls to avoid?

As a corporate brander and an entrepreneur for the last 25 years, I’ve seen a fair number of branding and marketing mistakes. Not only have I made a few brand blunders myself, but in my work as an executive coach and marketing trainer for other entrepreneurs, I’ve developed a list of the most common branding mistakes – as well as many great branding successes.

Below are the Top 10 most costly branding mistakes that I’ve seen entrepreneurs make.

1. ***Getting creative with your company name.*** Clever names may be fun to develop, but if your target market cannot tell who you are and what you stand for from your company name, customers may just pass you by. Potential clients won’t take the time to figure out your business. So, make it easy for people to “get” what you do. Would you rather spend your marketing dollars explaining the purpose of your business or let your company name do that for you? Why not spend your marketing funds to go deeper into how you can make a difference in the lives of your customers? A well-named business can simply make your job much easier.
2. ***Forgetting that you are your brand.*** No matter what you sell – and whether you like it or not – as an entrepreneur, you become the masthead for your business. Everything you do represents the brand of your company. I knew a business owner who lost a multi-country contract because he arrived at a meeting with alcohol on his breath from a previous night out on the town. His potential partners were concerned he might have a drinking problem, and it was enough to break the deal. But you don’t have to do something extreme to undermine your company’s brand. Maintain a character that is in keeping with your brand, and I guarantee it will do your company – and you – good.
3. ***Not confirming that a need for your product or service truly exists.*** Many small entrepreneurs put products on the market like they’re throwing darts. They say they don’t have the funds for market research, so they just wait to find out what will work in the market and what won’t. What they don’t realize is that they’re spending much more money on creating products and services that won’t sell than they would if they spent just a little bit on some focused market research. So, get creative – you don’t have to conduct fancy, expensive market research. If you’re selling a new toy, for example, go to the nearest day care center, and watch their children play with the toys. If you’re offering a new service, invite people who are in your demographic to try it out and then ask them what they think. Find out ahead of time if you have a viable product. It will save you a lot of money and time in the long run, and it will keep your brand’s image intact.
4. ***Not making the tough choices required to really target your marketing.*** The bigger your target market, the bigger your business, right? Well, that isn’t necessarily true. You can’t be everything to everyone. Your brand or business won’t be truly able to reach your target market unless you can deliver a meaningful point of difference. If you’re targeting all women 18 and older, you can’t show that entire age group how your product will help them because, let’s face it, an 18-year old has different needs than a 50-year old. So, segment and separate your target markets. Get specific. Find out what will appeal to your focused target market, and advertise your product or service with that in mind.

5. ***Not being realistic about your competition.*** Some businesses make the mistake of believing their product has no competition. This is never true! Even if there is no product or service that directly competes with yours, there is *always* something else on the market that your customers can choose to meet their needs over you. So, get to know your direct and indirect competition well, and look at them all realistically. What will differentiate your product or service from your competitors and fill your market’s needs? Then, focus your brand on those differences.
6. ***Not being consistent in your communications.*** If the DNA in your hair were different from the DNA in your fingernails, you’d be a mutant. The same is true for the way you communicate your brand. Power positioning means you take your positioning and then communicate it – consistently - across *everything* you do. If your positioning stands for one thing, but your website or a brochure you’ve created communicates something else, your brand will mutate, and you’ll never stand for anything. Your target market can only get to understand your brand well if all of your materials are consistent with what you want your brand to stand for.
7. ***Not choosing the right team members to reflect your brand.*** Because of their small company size, beginning entrepreneurs sometimes believe they should be “grateful” just to get people to work for them. Not true! Just as you represent your brand, so does every single one of your employees. Make sure the people you hire have the same character as the one you want your business to communicate in the marketplace. That means finding the best possible people to join your team, and spending a little extra to get them. The effort will pay back ten-fold.
8. ***Forgetting that your brand image extends to your employees, not just your customers.*** Do you treat your staff as well as you treat your customers? If you treat your team poorly, the word will get out, and it will undermine your brand. Consistently treat your team well, and eventually the best candidates will want to work for you. Word will get out that your company is up and coming. And that’s the kind of brand image you’re aiming for.
9. ***Not making tough choices about your brand’s offerings/benefits.*** Just as you can’t target your product to everyone in the marketplace, you must also make tough choices about what your brand will stand for. Don’t fall victim to “brand benefit scope creep!” Here’s an example: My first week in business, I was pretty nervous. I had left a very successful 6-figure job in a major corporation, and – as any first-time entrepreneur - I worried about being able to get enough work. I received two phone calls right away – one from one of the largest companies in Thailand, asking me to do Human Resources training; the other, from a great connection that wanted me to do some sales work. The truth is: Given my more general management background, I could have done both of these tasks, and done them well. And I loved the idea of landing two great clients in my very first week of running my own company! But I knew I had to stick to my guns. Branding and marketing were my passions – what I knew best and what I wanted to stand for. So, I picked up the phone, took a breath, and said “no” to both offers. Talk about terrifying! But, ultimately, it was the right decision. Fortunately, the phone rang the very next week with some branding and marketing engagements, and I accepted them. I’ve been able to maintain that focus successfully ever since.

10. **Not making your business something you love to do.** As an entrepreneur, you will be eating, sleeping, and breathing your business for a long, long time. If you don't absolutely love it, you will burn out quickly. So, don't choose to do something just because it's what you've always done. You'll spend way too many hours of your life unhappy, and your heart won't be in it. A few years ago, I coached a woman who was trying to create a new business brand based on her past experience rather than on her passion. When I asked her what she *really* loved to do, she said “work with horses.” Through our work together, she eventually realized she could combine her love of horses with the skills she had acquired in her past jobs. So, she created a training program that brought corporate executives to her ranch to learn leadership skills through working with the horses. Take her example, and find a way to live your passion. You'll be much happier for it.

Don't be hard on yourself! Every entrepreneur makes a branding or marketing misstep now and then. If you have fallen prey to any of these mistakes, pick yourself up, and do whatever's necessary to correct them. Then, keep these Top 10 branding errors in mind. The more you steer clear of these blunders, the faster you will build a powerhouse brand for your business and enjoy the success you deserve.

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