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Branding: Not Just for Beef

Done right, branding yield more repeat business and referrals, a more dependable flow of work, and higher profit margins. However, it's literally more than meets the eye.

“Most people think it's an ad campaign, but it's not image-based,” says David Miles, creative director of Denver-based Miles Real Estate Brand Development. “Branding is the practice of building trust.”

Specifically, it's a systemic way of communicating who you are to your customers. They make an emotional connection to your product and company, and keep coming back. That's how McDonald's, Nike, and other household names do it.

You don't have to be a huge corporation to brand your business. It pays off even for small-volume builders, and it's especially important for remodelers. “Lots of contractors coming into the industry work out of their trucks. Branding speaks to being established,” says Chris Elliott, director of marketing for 22-year-old M/A Peterson Design/Build in Edina, Minn.

Branding Essentials

According to Miles, branding requires four critical elements, as outlined below.

Internal audit. With your staff, identify your company's vision. Come up with a message to express what you're all about. One side benefit of an internal audit is it gets everyone on the same page.

Good product. “Smaller builders have a tendency to build what they want, so their brand tends to reflect them rather than what their customers want,” says Michael Sivage, president of Sivage Thomas Homes in Albuquerque, N.M.

To keep that from happening, learn from your customers. A month or so after their project's finished, ask them what they liked and what they didn't like about their home, your sales process, customer service, etc. Adjust your systems and product accordingly.

Customer profiling. Who are the people you build or remodel for? Consider income levels, age, marital status, family composition, cultural heritage, etc. Think of communication methods and language your customers will identify with.

Competitor analysis. You need to beat your competitors at their game without copying them. What makes you better than anyone else in your market?

Maintaining market share is a strong motivator for branding. Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Maracay Homes developed its “Flex Design” brand to compete with bigger builders entering its market. Likewise, M/A Peterson added landscape design to its list of services to represent its holistic approach to home improvement—and to keep customers from going elsewhere for new lawns, shrubbery, and the like.

Keep it Consistent

Communicating a brand consistently and intentionally to your customers imprints it in their consciousness. Every point of contact with your company must give them the same feeling about you.

Use visuals as brand enhancers. Keep them consistent by using a signature logo, color, and font on everything—letterhead, business cards, brochures, site and truck signage, Web site, ads, uniforms, customer giveaways, etc.

Train your employees so they’ll present the right message when answering phones, following up on e-mails, selling jobs, and interacting with others on jobsites. Educate trade contractors about your brand because they’re an extension of it.

Branding doesn’t end when the job does. “Make sure you have someone who can respond to service calls,” says Carl Hyman, owner of Alure Home Improvement in East Meadow, N.Y., who has three employees dedicated to that task. And get to their work right away. “I can tell my staff ‘I want service,’ but if I don’t have the mechanisms in place to deliver it, our reputation will suffer,” Hyman points out.

Keep it Fresh

Adapt branding strategies to the market. What works in one place may not work in another. In Albuquerque, Sivage markets his three home brands almost as separate companies, yet in Phoenix he presents them as different product lines within the same brand.

“We were competing with some of the largest builders in the country,” says the builder, who entered Phoenix four years ago. “Bringing three separate brands there would have diluted our ability to establish an identity.”

If you're unsure if your branding efforts are working, hire a market research firm to ask past and present customers what they think of when they hear your company's name or brand. "We all have opinions of who we think we are, but that isn't always the way people perceive us," says Sivage.

Branding takes some effort, but you can't afford *not* to do it. "Contractors have a brand whether they know it or not. Most allow the public to shape their brand instead of managing it themselves," says Miles.

Wouldn't you rather be known as the area's favorite builder or remodeler instead of the folks who drive those beat-up trucks and don't return phone calls? We thought so.

For more information on branding, read 101 Power Strategies: Tools to Promote Yourself as the Contractor of Choice, available from BuilderBooks.com. Call 800-223-2665 or log onto www.builderbooks.com to order. The book is \$14.95 for NAHB members, \$16.61 for non-members.

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