



Building a brand online: A guide to success

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Building a brand online will play an important part in the success of a business. Making your branding - including logo, tagline and website - synonymous with your company is a surefire way to connect with your target audience and attract new customers.

This highlights how important first impressions are if you want to get ahead. Gwendolen Fairfax, one of the lead characters in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is famed for telling her friend: "My first impressions of people are invariably right."¹

While this may be a work of fiction, there is a kernel of truth in what she has to say, as first impressions do matter. This is why firms should think long and hard about their branding to make sure it will be engaging for consumers. Not everyone is going to be as big as McDonalds, Nike or Amazon, but this does not mean your company cannot carve out its own identity through intelligent marketing.

This Blue Paper looks at the importance of building a solid online brand in today's digital world. It looks at why you should build a brand, how you can build a brand and outlines examples of companies that have successfully developed their brand both on and offline.

Chapter 1: Why should you build an online presence?

According to research commissioned by FreeWebsite.com², building and refining a brand online is essential to:

- **Gain customer loyalty** - Customers will keep coming back to a site if they have a good experience, even if there are no promotions
- **Develop a reputation** - Companies can build awareness and improve visibility with good branding, which should attract more customers
- **Build a business** - Strong branding can drive sales in a number of ways,

¹ Female Characters in "The Importance of Being Earnest", About.com, <<http://plays.about.com/od/importanceofbeingearnest/a/wildefemale.htm>>

² How to Effectively Build Your Brand Online, Search Engine Journal, November 16th 2012, <<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/how-to-effectively-build-your-brand-online/51949/>>



such as becoming a trusted retailer or coming to people's attention on social media channels

While news headlines are often hogged by big brands, small businesses are in many ways the lifeblood of the economy. The web is a great leveller, as it allows smaller firms to compete with their larger counterparts. With a well thought-out online branding strategy, even a start-up business could reach audiences far beyond where traditional marketing budgets would have previously taken them.

Whether it is launching a first website, or redesigning and updating an existing one, the number one aim of your firm in terms of online branding has to be creating a "professional, polished website."³

As already mentioned, appearances matter as customers will form an opinion - rightly or wrongly - about your website the very first time they view it. Luckily, thanks to the availability of common web tools, templates and affordable website design services, coming up with an innovative and aesthetically pleasing look is easier than ever.

A few things to bear in mind include:⁴

- **Always see what your competitors are doing** - This will help you to evaluate whether your website is as good, or maybe even better
- **Make a list of the functions you like and dislike on your website** - This should make it easier to pinpoint what areas of your website are in need of improvement
- **Professional vs Personal** - You should steer clear of making your site too personal, as this can distract from your core message. A unique web personality is fine, but always bear in mind what you're trying to sell or promote

The proliferation of mobile devices, both smartphones and tablets, means more and more people access the web on the go. Indeed, figures from Gartner show that during the fourth quarter of 2012, there were 207.7 million smartphone units sold - a 38 per cent year-on-year increase.⁵



³ Creating Big Online Brands, Register, <<http://www.register.com/learningcenter/marketing/creating-big-online-brands>>

⁴ Creating Big Online Brands, Register, <<http://www.register.com/learningcenter/marketing/creating-big-online-brands>>

⁵ Gartner Says Worldwide Mobile Phone Sales Declined 1.7 Percent in 2012, Gartner, February 13th 2013, <<http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2335616>>

Because of this, having an established online brand is more important than ever, as it provides businesses with an opportunity to grow and reach a much bigger audience than would be possible through traditional means of advertising even as recently as two years ago.

Brand reputation is something that will typically be developed over a long period of time. Companies cannot expect to have a massive online following straight away - although unfortunately negative stories can have an immediate effect. Instead, you need to start by making sure your business is getting good reviews, mentions, testimonials and feedback.⁶



Every business has competition in some shape or form and so brand reputation could be the difference between securing a sale and missing out. Moreover, once people become comfortable using a particular business, loyalty may overtake price as the primary motivation in their eyes. Regardless of whether or not you are operating in the B2B or B2C market, you require a good reputation to be successful, as:

- 92 per cent of buyers check online reviews before making a purchase
- 80 per cent of consumers do not buy products that get negative online reviews
- 87 per cent of consumers are influenced by good online reviews⁷

In short, businesses cannot afford to have a bad reputation on or offline, as it could have a significant effect on their future success. However, building a positive online presence is not an overnight job and firms need to put a plan in place that will bear fruit in the long term.

Chapter 2: How to build a brand online?

Ultimately, the aim is to stand out in the online marketplace and make sure your message is synonymous with your brand. In order to do this, there are a series of measures companies should consider⁸:

⁶ Why does online brand reputation matter?, Simplify 360, Jan 30th 2013, <<http://simplify360.com/blog/why-does-online-brand-reputation-matter>>

⁷ Why does online brand reputation matter?, Simplify 360, Jan 30th 2013, <<http://simplify360.com/blog/why-does-online-brand-reputation-matter>>

⁸ How to Effectively Build Your Brand Online, Search Engine Journal, November 16th 2012, <<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/how-to-effectively-build-your-brand-online/51949>>

Brand Reputation Builders

Get to know your audience

Employ a listening strategy and do some research into the keywords people are likely to use when searching for your type of product or service. On top of this be aware how your clients spend their time online. What is the typical profile of your customer, in terms of gender, age, sex, household income and where are they located?

Tailor your strategy

Once you begin to understand your audience, you can tailor your strategy to interact with them. Your brand should reflect your expertise and unique selling points - that is what makes you different from (and hopefully better than!) your competitors. However, brands should not be afraid to ask customers what they are getting right and wrong. Whether it is pricing, delivery methods or the brand's central message, engagement is essential. Striking up conversations through Facebook and Twitter and listening to what customers have to say will leave your audience feeling much more valued.

Give your brand a voice

Based on your research, determine not only what message you want to put forward, but also think about what your customers might want to hear.⁹ This process should create the building blocks that will form your brand voice. Two successful online card companies are Moonpig and Funky Pigeon, both of these company names do not directly relate to the product offering, but due to the playful and interactive branding they've built, they're now widely recognised. When it comes to creating additional content, you should visualise your audience and let this act as a guide. For example, Moonpig and Funky Pigeon are both very good at producing content based around seasonal trends, such as Mother's Day and Christmas when the volume greeting cards purchased online rises.

Embrace the brand

Consistent messaging needs to be at the heart of everything a firm does. If brands ensure their message remains the same throughout every stage of the buying cycle, there is a much better chance of consumers understanding their business. Similarly, a multi-platform message - one that works across smartphones, tablets and desktops - is recommended, as the authority of the message will grow, the

⁹ 5 Key Strategies to Build Your Brand Online, Search Engine Land, April 7th 2010, <<http://searchengineland.com/5-key-strategies-to-build-your-brand-online-39420>>



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more often it appears. Those with websites that don't work well on mobile phones could potentially lose out on future business.

Create the right connections

In an ideal world, you will find yourself in the situation whereby other firms look to collaborate with your organisation, such as hosting events together or entering into a trading partnership. Not only will this type of relationship - and the web links it brings - enhance organic search results, it will also add weight to your role as a thought leader within your industry. On top of this, owning a short and memorable web address is advised, as it will make searching much easier for customers and add authenticity to your brand.

Social media

Companies also need to think about their social media strategy. Among the questions that should be asked are:

- What do you want your brand to say or do online?
- What types of interactions do you want your consumers to have with your business?

The starting point should be researching the various social media channels - such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - to see if any suit your needs. Companies should listen to see what is being said about their brand and if there is little activity, start a conversation.¹⁰ Whilst these conversations can prove to be valuable interactions it's unlikely to be a forum to voice sales messages to your target audience.

FreeWebsite.com offers the following tips for using Twitter and Facebook:¹¹

- Never bite off more than you can chew and take focus away from your customer pool
- Choose a username that is easy to spell and remember
- Use custom short URLs, these make it easy for consumers to see what page they are going to view
- Steer clear of jargon and don't exceed the character limit

¹⁰ 5 Key Strategies to Build Your Brand Online, Search Engine Land, April 7th 2010, <<http://searchengineland.com/5-key-strategies-to-build-your-brand-online-39420>>

¹¹ How to Effectively Build Your Brand Online, Search Engine Journal, November 16th 2012, <<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/how-to-effectively-build-your-brand-online/51949>>



- Build up conversations by inviting feedback and providing comments that can be shared
- Promote your brand by offering expertise where applicable

Guest posts

Becoming accepted as an online authority on your subject matter can go a long way to establishing your brand. One way to improve visibility is to blog on a series of sites related to the field you operate within.¹² Get in touch with blog owners and pitch ideas that you think will be relevant. When possible add an 'About the Author' section at the end of the post and link back to your website.

Embrace the web

Savvy companies often use web-only offers and products in an effort to develop their online following. Not only does this foster a sense of interaction, it will also encourage customers to return to the site to look for a good deal. Web-only businesses that operate with low overheads should look to channel as much time and budget as possible into marketing and branding.

Send out e-newsletters

Brands should look to send out an e-newsletter at least once a month, as this will help them to build up a vast network of clients, customers and contacts.¹³ If you share valuable content with subscribers, they can then share it with their colleagues and friends and this should hopefully increase your reach and over time help you to develop authority within your particular industry.

Chapter 3: Effective brand development

When it comes to developing a brand, it goes without saying there's more than one way to be successful. Despite the fact more and more of us are going online to complete a whole myriad of work-related and personal purchases, brands do not necessarily need to focus all of their operations on the web.

The following three examples look at the options open to companies as they seek to build a brand. These include following a purely online strategy, mixing the web with the high street (known as bricks & clicks) or opting for something completely different in order to attract consumers' attention.



¹² 10 Ways For Entrepreneurs To Build Brands Online, Mashable, May 25th 2011, <<http://mashable.com/2011/05/25/entrepreneur-brand-building>>

¹³ 10 Ways For Entrepreneurs To Build Brands Online, Mashable, May 25th 2011, <<http://mashable.com/2011/05/25/entrepreneur-brand-building>>

A web-only brand: Amazon

Retail giant Amazon is a great example of a successful firm that doesn't have a presence on the high street, and has managed to forge an impressive reputation based solely on its internet-based activities.

The 2011 European Best Retail Brand survey by Kelkoo revealed that Amazon was the UK's number one retail brand¹⁴ - it was also the only web-based brand to feature in the top ten. Indeed, Amazon managed to pick up 40 per cent of the vote, putting it ahead of retail giants such as Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Asda and Apple.

The following points demonstrate why Amazon is flourishing:¹⁵

- **Value for money** - 54 per cent of Britons said value for money is the most important consideration when making a purchase, Amazon ranked first in this field
- **Deals and offers** - 17 per cent said this is the most influential attribute and Amazon was fourth
- **Trustworthiness** - 7 per cent viewed this as essential before a sale can take place, Amazon placed second behind Marks and Spencer
- **Customer service** - 6 per cent stated this is their number one consideration and Amazon again came out in first place



In total, the survey looked at ten categories and Amazon emerged in front of four of them and was second in another three. This highlights how important it is for brands to offer a good service across the board and it also shows how price is not the only consideration for customers when they are making a purchase. Amazon is successful as they offer a good overall brand experience and should serve as an example to other companies looking to develop their web operations.

Chris Simpson, chief marketing officer of European price comparison service Kelkoo, said: "Consumers are sophisticated and expect great customer service,

¹⁴ Online Retailer Voted UK's Best Brand, Kelkoo, September 27th 2011, <<http://press.kelkoo.co.uk/kelkoobestretailbrand.html>>

¹⁵ Online Retailer Voted UK's Best Brand, Kelkoo, September 27th 2011, <<http://press.kelkoo.co.uk/kelkoobestretailbrand.html>>

excellent delivery options and a good overall experience from a retailer they trust. With this in mind, we aren't surprised to see an online retailer that manages to touch so many shopper passion points voted the nation's best brand."¹⁶

A 'Bricks and Clicks' brand: John Lewis

Research by Hitwise¹⁷ has found high street retailers that have both a physical and online presence can attract significant online traffic. Retail giants such as Argos, Next and Marks and Spencer are faring well and part of the reason for this could be because these companies are already established brands, customers feel comfortable using them. However, the recent demise of established high street retailers HMV and Comet demonstrates how a good offline reputation does not necessarily guarantee overall success.

John Lewis, a stalwart of the high street, has been able to successfully combine the high street and the web in its branding. Aside from its now famous Christmas adverts - the 2012 version has been viewed over 2.5 million times on YouTube and won a TV commercial of the year award - it also promotes the mantra 'Never Knowingly Undersold', which means it matches the prices and promotions on offer in rival shops.¹⁸

Andy Street, managing director of John Lewis, believes the combination of good service and a trustworthy reputation allows the company to perform well. For example, 75 per cent of people said they would trust John Lewis as an institution if it was a bank.¹⁹ This attention to detail in developing trust is key to its success and the retailer has shown over time that it is an expert at creating buzz around its offerings, which it backs up with top-quality products.

Something completely different: CompareTheMeerkat

Car insurance website CompareTheMarket has developed a whole microsite offering thanks to the popularity of its CompareTheMeerkat adverts. This is a perfect example of how brands can combine their offline and online operations in order to improve sales.²⁰



¹⁶ Online Retailer Voted UK's Best Brand, Kelkoo, September 27th 2011, <<http://press.kelkoo.co.uk/kelkoobestretailbrand.html>>

¹⁷ High street retailers winning online shopping battle, Hitwise, August 6th 2008, <<http://www.experian.com/blogs/hitwise-uk/2008/08/06/high-street-retailers-winning-online-shopping-battle>>

¹⁸ Bricks and clicks help John Lewis partnership's sales snowball, The Telegraph, December 15th 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/retailandconsumer/9746599/Bricks-and-clicks-help-John-Lewis-partnerships-sales-snowball.html>>

¹⁹ Bricks and clicks help John Lewis partnership's sales snowball, The Telegraph, December 15th 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/retailandconsumer/9746599/Bricks-and-clicks-help-John-Lewis-partnerships-sales-snowball.html>>

²⁰ CompareTheMeerkat.com show brands how social media should be done, SEOptimize, January 12th 2009, <<http://www.seoptimise.com/blog/2009/01/comparethemeerkatcom-shows-brands-how-social-media-should-be-done.html>>

Across YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, the brand interacts with customers in the guise of Aleksandr Orlov, who is the star of the TV adverts. This means the character regularly updates his followers on various social media channels and this light-hearted approach is part of a deliberate attempt to add a personal touch to the brand, but at the same time make people aware of the customer service options that are available.

According to market analysts Mintel, more than 24 million people use a price comparison website each month.²¹ Such is the popularity of these advertisements that it has forced other companies in the insurance sector to reassess their activities - the true marker of a successful campaign.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Building an online presence requires firms to find the right blend of promotional activities, which includes engaging customers on social media, understanding your target audience and creating a consistent message. By gaining customer loyalty and developing a strong and trustworthy reputation, a company can set itself on the right path to success.

The proliferation of smartphones and tablets means that having an established online brand is more important than ever, as an increasing number of people are looking to make purchases via the web. By pursuing a well-crafted brand strategy, small businesses can compete with larger organisations and this means they have the chance to reach a much bigger target audience than ever before.

With the recent demise of Jessops and Comet, the challenges facing high street chains have come to the fore. While these retailers both had excellent offline reputations, which had been developed over time, they had to close down because of poor sales. Nowadays, some brands may find it more prosperous to develop an excellent web presence. However, if a firm's audience is primarily offline, there is still value in using traditional advertising models and there will always be cases of firms being successful without embracing the web.

The one thing all companies need to remember is they should always look to interact with their customers, as they are - and always will be - the lifeblood of any successful business.



²¹ How meerkat Aleksandr Orlov helped increase the market for TV ads, the Guardian, January 16th 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/jan/16/aleksander-orlov-price-comparison-ads>>



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