

Defining the brand

A brand is a tool used in business to communicate information or concepts that are connected with a good or a service. According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” (AMA 2003) Thus, brands can be thought of as a conceptual lens through which consumers see what an organization is offering. The first step to build a strong brand is to define the brand identity.

Brand identity is what the organization chooses their brand name to mean (Aaker, 1996). The brand identity conveys at-a-glance the distinctive attributes of the organization, builds awareness of and an attitude toward the organization, and paves the way for new relationships with customers. As part of the brand identity, we can define the brand’s value proposition, which is a statement on the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand and that provide value to the customer (Aaker, 1996).

Defining the personal brand

Much like a brand describes what the organization is, a personal brand describes who you are. To define the brand identity of your personal brand you can engage in self-reflection: What are your values? What are your passions? What are your goals? How are you different from your peers? What do you do that you are most proud of? A thorough assessment will help define your brand identity and value proposition.

A simple tool to determine your most important values is the “Rokeach value survey” (1973) presented in **Exhibit 1**. Personal values can be instrumental, which are values that serve as means to achieving your ends, or terminal, which are values that can be thought of as goals that you want to achieve in life. First, read the list of terminal personal values and rank them in order of importance. In other words, what is most important for you to achieve in life? Second, read the list of instrumental values and consider the extent to which you use each of these values as a guiding principle in your life. For example, how important is it for you to be hard-working? Think about each value and rank them from the most to the least important. Note that ranking your values from a list of important values might be more difficult than it seems, so give some time to this task and carefully consider these values in light of your life. From these rankings, you can identify your top three instrumental values and your top three terminal values. Now that you have a clearer idea of what is most important to you, it will be easier to make decisions that involve value trade-offs.

Your passions can be thought of as things you are enthusiastic about. Think about the things that excite you; the things that you would like to do at any time of the day on any given day. Think about the things you would like to do when you are relaxing. Or think about the things you used to like or liked to do when you were a child. Write down your top three passions.

To assess your goals and get insights on the pursuit of your goals, we recommend an exercise developed by Kegan and Lahey (2009). The authors propose that people suffer from “immunity to change,” which prevents them from doing what is needed to do to achieve their personal and professional goals. The authors combined insights from adult development psychology and organizational consulting to create an effective process that can bring about change. Kegan and Lahey argue that following the five-step framework would not only lead people to discover their goals and the hidden resistance to these goals, but would also help them to design solutions that lead to successful changes. The process to overcome the “immunity to change” is divided into five steps (refer to **Exhibit 2**):

1. In the first step, you are asked to identify your improvement goals. These goals should be defined in positive or approach terms rather than negative or avoidance terms and should be important to you. If a given goal rates less than 5 on a scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 7 (extremely important), it is not an important goal. An example of a goal is “to become more productive” (rather than “to stop being unproductive”).
2. In the next step, you are asked to think of and write down any behavior that you engage in and that works against the achievement of this goal: For instance, pursuing perfectionism (prevents you from being more productive).
3. Next, you need to specify the risks of doing the opposite of the behavior that works against your goal (described in step 2). In the example that we are using, what would happen if we do not pursue perfectionism? The risk of not pursuing perfectionism is that the work would be “imperfect” and would have shortcomings.
4. In the fourth step, you have to describe the most deeply embedded assumptions of how you think the world works. Such an assumption is thought of as a belief that leads to or explains the behaviors listed in the second step and that are impeding goal achievement. In our example, the assumption that explains pursuing perfectionism is that “when work is not perfect, then it is not good.” This is the belief, or assumption, that leads to the behavior (“perfectionism”), which, in turn, is preventing your goal (“to be more productive”) from being achieved.
5. Following this diagnosis of what prevents you from achieving your goals, you can move to design simple tests of what would happen if you act against these assumptions. One such test could be “not revising any work a third time.” After repeatedly running such tests, hopefully you will figure out that your assumptions do not always hold and can be relaxed. Upon reflecting on the findings, you should be able to overcome the “immunity to change,” stop engaging in the behaviors that are preventing you from achieving your goals, and eventually achieve your goals.

To define your strengths, we recommend completion of the survey of character strengths developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004).^a The test considers 24 strengths (e.g., judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness, hope, optimism, future-mindedness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, love of learning) and ranks them for you upon completion of the survey, highlighting your top five strengths.

This set of information should help you define your brand identity and value proposition: A short and concise description of what you do and how you add value, benefit, and quality. Questions that can help to define one's brand identity and value proposition include: What do you do for customers? What problems do you solve? Why do people do business with you? What kind of solutions do you provide? An example of a value proposition is "I help companies find ways to improve their marketing activities so they can reduce their costs and increase their profits" (instead of "I'm a consultant").

Defining the market/audience

The audience carries perceptions about brands and associates them with a set of expectations.

Although organizations define and communicate their brand identity, the audience decodes the brand communication to form a brand image, and thus brands are said to reside in the mind of the audience. When brand identity is strong and well communicated, brand identity and brand image overlap to a great extent, if not fully.

Brand image can be defined as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller 2001). It is what consumers feel and think when they hear or see a brand name, including perceptions of brand personality. Brand image refers to the associations that consumers have with the brand.

Given that brands are associated with a set of information, concepts, and expectations, the audience uses brands as shortcuts to facilitate their decisions. Thus, it is important to define the target market to adjust brand identity and brand image according to the audience. In his chapter *Creating customer advantage*, Joachimsthaler (2007) describes the demand-oriented brand management approach developed by BMW: By listening to the audience and adjusting brand identity according to consumer perceptions and to what resonates with them, BMW managed to significantly reduce the gap between brand identity (how they define their brand) and brand image (how customers perceive the brand).

^a Seligman, M. Authentic happiness. University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx> (accessed June 3, 2013).

Defining your audience

Likewise, it is important to define the target market of personal brands. Who is the audience with whom you want to connect? Who exactly are they? Where are they? Is there another segment that matters? Write down who your audience is, including your customers, colleagues, and even competitors.