

What Do You Stand For?

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Every company, big or small, has an image. The consumer world judges your product based on your image. And the most successful companies have cohesive and compelling brand identities.

David Aaker, author of *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*, discusses the complex process of creating your company's brand. "The most important assets of any business are intangible: its company name, brand, symbols, and slogans, and their underlying associations, perceived quality, name awareness, customer base, and proprietary resources such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships."

The building blocks to successful business are not just a quality product and a nice logo. The market has plenty of that. What the consumer is looking for is a reason to buy Joe's Jam instead of Sally's. This is where branding comes in.

Contrary to most thinking, a good brand is not built around a good logo. A good brand, one that lasts through the ever changing trends, is molded from the company's values.

The first step in creating your company's brand involves some soul-searching. What does your company stand for? What is the company's core philosophy affecting all the work you do? Defining your company gives you purpose. Every aspect of your business should be driven by these core ideals, and this is what will set you apart. In defining yourself you are strategically planning your company image, not what image you want to project, but what your company is about.

After there is a distinctive definition of your company you come to the task of creating the visual expression of your company. The image you project to the world should reflect and strengthen your company image. This is how cohesive branding happens.

Choosing between Joe and Sally's Jam is essentially asking the consumer: Which one of these *looks* like it would taste better? Joe's Jam may be made with real fruit, but if Sally's looks better on the shelf, you'll have a hard time attracting first time customers. Your brand needs to exude the quality of your company's product and be able to communicate that visually with the consumer.

Transforming your company's identity into a visual expression is the final step in branding. You want your logo, advertisements, letterhead, everything that has your name on it to reflect your identity as a company and attract people to it.

In *Building Strong Brands*, Aaker cautions that "creating a brand identity is more than finding out what customers say they want. It must also reflect the soul and vision of the brand, what it hopes to achieve."

All new companies dream of huge success. Assume your company's success when it comes time to create your brand. Your logo should be a reflection not just of what your company stands for, but what it aspires to be.

You may be a brand new company, with no money and you've already blown your budget. While you certainly don't want to spend exorbitant sums on a logo, you'd be throwing your money away trying to create a logo yourself or purchasing an online template. At the same time, you are not a designer and neither are your children, so you should pick a design firm that fits your needs. Allow the professionals to create your brand.

Visually, your logo is the most important part of your business; it will follow you everywhere your company goes. Everything in the market is about perception, how you represent yourself visually reflects the company's values and the products it sells.

To get the right logo, not the fanciest, not the most expensive, but the logo that fits your company, you need to find a design firm that will understand not just good design, but good design that fits you. The most expensive designer could create an exquisite logo, but if it does not reflect your business, then there is a disconnect between your company and its image.

The best thing to do is shop around for a design firm. Choosing the right firm to do your logo should be reflected in how much you like their portfolio, a mutual trust and respect and most importantly an understanding of your company. When brand image reflects brand identity it is a powerful thing to behold.

No matter how much better Joe's Jam is than Sally's no one knows that until they try it. Branding your company is all about giving the consumer a reason to try yours.

Top Shelf Design is a graphic design and marketing firm located in Washington, DC. They offer both web and print design. They are located on the Web at <http://www.topshelfdesign.net> .