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Branding 101

Class is in session

Index

- 01 Branding in a nutshell
- 02 The role of branding in education marketing
- 03 Building a brand from scratch
- 04 Common mistakes and pitfalls

Introduction

Branding is more than just a logo or a tagline; it's a holistic representation of who you are and what you stand for as an education company, ed(tech) business, or otherwise. It's about connecting with your audience and building trust and loyalty through consistent messaging and visuals. Think of it this way: Your brand is your roadmap, it's what you refer to when you're feeling lost and need to correct your course. It's a visual representation of your values, mission, and goals. It's who you are.

In this guide, we'll explore the fundamentals of branding, from defining what it is to understanding the critical components of a successful brand strategy. Whether you're just starting out on your branding journey or looking to reevaluate and refresh your existing brand, this guide will provide valuable insights and practical tips for creating a strong, effective brand.



Branding in a nutshell

Back to basics

Branding is often thought of as a concept that's only relevant to Fortune 500s or extravagant corporations, but truth be told, it's just as important for educational institutions and companies. In today's competitive landscape, a strong brand can help you stand out from the crowd, attract students, investors, and partners and retain alumni. Effective branding creates an urge to belong. A sense of pride. People want to be associated with a great brand.

Here, we'll explore branding, why it's crucial for education marketing, and how it can help schools and universities achieve their marketing goals.

“A successful brand will work on your behalf. It's the subtle yet impactful form of actively molding your brand image. Through a combination of imagination, expertise, and planning, a brand can craft a unique identity that distinguishes itself from others and fosters a bond with its target audience.”

Jayde Robertson
Creative Strategist, Pink Orange

Think of branding as building a school. Just like the building needs a strong foundation, a good roof, and a clear structure, a successful brand needs to have a clear and consistent identity, messaging, and image. This starts with your institution's name, logo, and tagline - these elements help to create a visual representation of your brand that people can easily recognize, and more notably, remember. But branding goes beyond just what you see on the surface. It also encompasses the experiences and interactions that people have with your organization.

Just like a well-designed school creates a welcoming and comfortable environment for the people who enter it, a strong brand creates a relationship with your desired audience. It helps you stand out from the competition. It's about showing your target audience what makes you special and why they should choose you. Whether you're a small business, a non-profit, or an educational institution, a successful brand can help you build trust, attract new customers or students, and maintain long-term relationships with your stakeholders.

Technically speaking, there are 3 elements that make up the branding process.

Brand: The holistic image

Identity: The sensory aspects that relate to the brand

Logo: The unique identifier

The role of branding in education marketing

In education marketing, branding can often be seen as just another box to check - a logo, tagline, or brochure to hand out at events. It can quickly become a "have to do" item, and in this, it loses its meaning. But what if we looked at branding as an opportunity to disrupt the status quo and do things differently in the crowded world of education?

Think about it: tuition prices are skyrocketing, students are bombarded with unsolicited information from multiple institutions, and education itself is rapidly changing to keep up with technology and new ways of learning. Why settle for a cookie-cutter approach to branding?

Instead, we're in the position to use branding to cut through the noise and reach our target audience in a meaningful and memorable way.

At its core, branding is the process of creating a unique and consistent identity for an organization, and building a relationship with its target audience through the use of its name, logo, messaging visual elements, and experiences. In education marketing, this means creating a distinctive image and reputation for the institution and communicating its unique value proposition to prospective students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Here's what an effective brand can accomplish, on your behalf.

Attract & retain students and customers

A distinctive, well-established brand can help the institution stand out in a crowded marketplace and appeal to the right students and their families. A consistent and memorable brand can also help build loyalty and commitment among current students and alumni.

Building credibility

A well-defined brand conveys a sense of professionalism, stability, and expertise. When executed with precision, it can build trust and credibility among stakeholders. This is especially important in education, where these are critical factors in attracting students, faculty, or investors.

Nurturing reputation

A strong brand helps to create a positive image and reputation for an institution and can help to establish it as a leader in its field. This can attract top talent, foster partnerships and collaborations, and enhance the institution's overall reputation.

When we think of a school, the first thing that should come to mind is its dedication to delivering top-notch education and the unique traits that make its vision and mission stand out. But, let's be real, a strong brand image can only help a school stand out even more. Having a solid brand can elevate the school's perception and boost its efforts to reach its educational goals.

The process of branding is simply unavoidable. While we might not relate "branding" and "education", the two can form a mutually beneficial relationship.

What makes a good brand?

"A strong brand in education marketing is not just a logo or a tagline, it's a promise to deliver exceptional education, a reflection of unique values, and a connection to the future."

Shalom Jacobs

Lead Designer, Pink Orange

A great brand effectively communicates its unique value proposition, establishes a positive reputation, and builds a strong connection with its target audience. Here are the essential elements of a good brand:

- **Clarity:** A good brand has a clear and concise message that communicates its unique value proposition, and sets it apart from the competition. This message should be reflected in the brand's messaging, visual elements, and experiences.
- **Consistency:** A good brand is consistent in its messaging, visual elements, and experiences.
- **Relevance:** A good brand is relevant to its target audience and speaks to their needs, wants, and values.
- **Flexibility:** A good brand is flexible and adaptable to change. This means that it can evolve and grow with the needs and expectations of its target audience, while still maintaining its core essence and identity.

Nuances aside, what really makes a brand successful?

A brand is a connection

Branding your business can be a powerful tool for building lasting connections with your customers. After all, a great brand is like a good friendship—it's built on trust and an emotional bond that can't be easily broken.

Think about it: we make so many of our purchase decisions without even realizing it. Research shows that emotions play a big role in the subconscious mind, and that's why brands that make people feel good are so successful. When customers have a strong emotional connection to a brand, they're more likely to become loyal fans and recommend it to others.

So, when you're thinking about branding your business, start by considering the emotions you want your target audience to feel. What kind of relationship do you want to build with them? How can you make them feel valued, understood, and confident in choosing your products or services? By connecting with your prospective students or customers on an emotional level, you'll create a brand that truly stands out from the crowd.

Live your values

Believing in something is one thing, but bringing it to life through your brand is another. Consumers are wise and can quickly tell if a brand is genuinely invested in its beliefs or if they're just jumping on the latest trend. The key to embodying your beliefs is to integrate them into every aspect of your brand experience, from your copy, visual elements, product design, and advertising.

For example, Lush Cosmetics embodies its belief in handmade products by mentioning fresh ingredients in its ads and creating store designs that evoke a farmer's market.

Similarly, Lady Gaga has built a strong and dedicated following by being true to herself and advocating for equality and those who feel misunderstood. To bring your beliefs to life through your brand, consider all your interactions with your customers and find ways to integrate your thoughts into those experiences.

Hone in on your story

When it comes to connecting with consumers, the story of your brand plays a crucial role.

People are naturally drawn to great stories, which is why books and movies that capture the hearts of the audience often become bestsellers.

These stories evoke emotions and create unforgettable bonds that stay with us for days, weeks, or even longer. The same goes for brand storytelling. In a world where people are constantly bombarded with products and information, having a strong brand story can help set you apart from the competition and establish an emotional connection with your audience. This emotional connection acts as a powerful advocate for your brand, helping to engage and retain customers in the long term.

Building a brand from scratch

Building a strong brand is a thrilling journey. It's about creating a unique and memorable identity that captures the essence of your business and resonates with your target audience. A brand is a collection of assets, including your content, tone of voice, visuals, digital presence, and even influencer partnerships, that come together to shape how your audience perceives you. With a step-by-step guide, you can bring your brand to life, and create an impact that leaves a lasting impression on your prospective students, or customers.



Follow these 7 steps to bring your vision to life, and discover the magic of building a brand that is truly your own!

1. Identify your target audience

Before you start creating a brand, it's crucial to understand who your target audience is. This helps you tailor your brand to them. When you have a clear understanding of your target audience, you'll be able to create messaging and artwork that resonates with them, which in turn leads to increased engagement and brand loyalty. Knowing your target audience also helps you make informed decisions about the channels you should use to reach them, the type of content you should create, and even the products or services you should offer.

2. Dive into your competitors

Before diving into building your brand, it's important to take a step back and research your competition. Understanding your competitors is key to setting yourself apart in the marketplace and creating a unique brand. By researching your competitors, you can identify their strengths and weaknesses and gain insights into what works and what doesn't in your industry. You can also see what gaps exist in the market that you can fill with your own brand. This information is valuable in creating a brand strategy that will stand out and attract your target audience.

3. Define the focus of your brand

This means understanding your unique selling proposition, values, and the problem you are solving for your target audience. Having a clear focus for your brand will help you make informed decisions about the direction of your brand and ensure that every aspect of your brand, from your messaging to your visual identity, is aligned with your mission.

By defining the focus of your brand, you set yourself up for success, as you will have a roadmap to guide you in your branding efforts, and the ability to effectively communicate your brand to your target audience. Additionally, a well-defined focus will help you stand out from the competition and make a lasting impression on your target audience.

4. Develop your brand personality

In education marketing, having a strong brand personality can be the difference between getting lost in the noise or standing out to your prospective students. A brand personality gives your educational brand a unique voice, personality, and vibe that sets it apart from competitors. It's the character and personality that sets the tone for all of your interactions with students, parents, and other stakeholders. A well-defined brand personality can attract and retain loyal students and parents, and also build a strong emotional connection with your target audience. By taking the time to develop a brand personality, you're giving your educational brand a foundation that will help you differentiate yourself, build trust, and connect with your target audience on an emotional level.

5. Define your name and tagline, but leave room for flexibility

Choosing the right name and tagline for your educational institution is a crucial step in the branding process. A name that is memorable and easy to remember will stick with potential students and make it easier for them to spread the word about your institution. The name should be unique, and not too similar to competitors, to avoid confusion. Additionally, the tagline should encapsulate the focus and mission of your institution, while being memorable and impactful. When choosing a name and tagline, it's important to consider their flexibility and ability to evolve with your institution as it grows and evolves.

6. Choose your assets

Your brand's color palette, font, and imagery all contribute to how consumers perceive your brand. The right combination of these elements can make your brand stand out, convey a specific emotion, and even evoke memories in consumers.

It's important to choose assets that align with your brand personality and messaging, as well as complement one another. Being mindful of color psychology and font choice can help you make informed decisions that positively impact the overall perception of your brand. Remember to keep your brand assets flexible and adaptable to ensure they evolve with your brand over time.

7. Define your logo

Designing a logo for an educational institution is an important part of the branding process as it serves as a visual representation of the institution's identity. The logo should be memorable, easily recognizable, and convey the essence of the institution's brand personality.

Evolution is part of the process, too

A brand is never a finished product. It's something that can and should evolve over time to reflect changes in your business, the market, and your customers. In fact, we believe in this so strongly, that our very own brand has experienced its own evolution, due in part to the evolution of our clients. A flexible brand is a successful one. It's important to note that flexibility isn't a sign of inconsistency. It's a demonstration of growth, and willingness to adapt.

Brands that fail to evolve risk becoming stale and irrelevant, and may miss out on opportunities for growth. On the other hand, brands that embrace change can stay ahead of the curve and stay relevant to their target audience.

There are many examples of brands that have successfully evolved over the years. Coca-Cola, for example, has changed its logo, packaging, and marketing strategy several times, adapting to new trends and customer preferences. Apple, too, has continually evolved its brand, from the early days of the Apple II computer to the sleek and modern Apple of today. And Nike has shifted its focus from athletic shoes to a more lifestyle-oriented brand, leveraging technology and innovative design to stay relevant.

Re-branding doesn't have to mean starting from scratch. It can be as simple as updating your logo, refining your messaging, or exploring new marketing channels.

The key is to be open to change and embrace it when the time is right. By being flexible and adaptable, you can ensure that your brand stays fresh and relevant, no matter what changes come your way.



Common branding mistakes and pitfalls

Building a thriving brand requires effort, commitment, and careful consideration. As you work to create your brand, it's essential to be aware of any factors that could undermine its success so you can concentrate on crafting a cohesive plan. By examining mistakes that other brands have taken with their image, you can gain valuable insights to inform your own branding approach.

Misunderstanding branding

Creating a successful brand goes beyond just advertising and marketing. It involves carefully crafting a consistent image and identity that accurately represents your organization. In the world of education marketing, it's crucial to have a solid understanding of the impact branding has on the perception of your institution. This requires taking the time to research branding strategies and effectively integrating them into your marketing plan. By doing so, you can effectively communicate your institution's unique values and offerings to your target audience.

Forgetting to outline (realistic) brand values

Building a successful brand is all about creating a meaningful connection with your target audience. To do this, it's crucial to start by defining your company's mission and values. These values will serve as the foundation for your brand, guiding every aspect of your brand image and voice.

By having a clear sense of purpose, your brand will not only stand out but also resonate with your audience, helping you to build a loyal following. In education marketing, creating a brand based on strong values can help institutions connect with potential students and build a reputation for providing high-quality education.

Copying competitors

While it's natural to look to your competitors for inspiration, simply copying their branding strategies can dilute the impact of what made them successful in the first place. Instead, take the time to understand the principles behind their success and put your own spin on it. By doing so, you'll create a distinct brand image that will captivate your audience and establish your business as a leader in your industry.

Taking advice from nonexperts

Investing in the support of branding experts and building a team of seasoned marketing professionals can greatly enhance the chances of establishing a successful brand.

Bypassing the opportunity to consult with experts and instead opting to navigate the branding process without professional experience can result in a significant waste of time, resources, and effort. A well-crafted brand not only creates recognition but also sets the foundation for long-term success. Don't miss the chance to give your brand the attention it deserves, and consider working with professionals who have the knowledge and experience to guide you toward your goals.

Closing thoughts

Branding is a crucial aspect of marketing and plays a significant role in the success of a business. It's like dressing your institution for success, but less awkward.

It defines who you are, what you stand for, and how you want to be perceived by your target audience. When it comes to education branding, it's important to create a strong, recognizable image that sets your institution apart from others and captures the attention of prospective students and partners.

But let's be real, building a successful education brand requires time, effort, and careful planning. It's like trying to build a snowman without snow - you can do it, but it's going to take some creative thinking. That's why it's vital to understand the key elements of branding and have a clear understanding of your institution's mission and values. Working with experienced branding professionals and marketing experts can help ensure that your brand is effective, consistent, and long-lasting.

By following the principles outlined in this ebook, you can develop a strong brand that will help you attract and retain students and partners, and position your institution for success. So, let's get your institution's branding wardrobe on point and dress for the success you deserve.

