

Is it time to freshen your image?

It's a question I get asked pretty often: When should you change your business brand? There is not a set, easy answer to this question, but there are a few guidelines.

As we're all probably aware, brands take a lot of nurturing and attention to keep them healthy. Even the best brands require considerable and near-constant TLC in order to maintain stability, avoid staleness, survive constant cultural fluctuations, and compete effectively for top-of-mind awareness among targeted consumers. Not only that, if your brand's turf has recently been invaded by a powerful (and potentially threatening) upstart brand, the stakes only climb higher, and suddenly you find your maintenance efforts shifting to a full-on defensive effort. Best to anticipate this kind of competition with a good offensive plan, staying on top of your brand effectiveness.

I recommend putting a regular reserve into your budget for a professional brand audit every few years. A brand audit, conducted by a professional, assesses the effectiveness of your brand at every touchpoint and delivers to you concrete recommendations on how to strengthen your brand. Is all of your print collateral consistent in style, font and logo treatment? Do all of your staff and board members understand your brand and represent its tone and personality? How can you best ensure that your target audience understands the benefits you offer them, and how you are different than your competition? Your brand is your greatest asset. Period. So it is worth every penny, every minute spent to keep it healthy, contemporary and strong. You simply cannot effectively market a weak brand! Businesses that ignore their brands will find customers ignoring their business.

Equity

"Innovation," wrote Management icon Peter Drucker in *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, "is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship...the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth."

Before you change your brand, however, you need to get an idea of what's good among your current brand elements that you'd be nuts to get rid of? The share of the market your brand gives you, as expressed by these elements is your "brand equity."

While equity qualifies as an obvious, if not common-sense consideration during brand freshening, there are many case studies of brand equity slipping under the radar of project teams, to the obvious detriment of the brand and its targeted consumers. Be mindful of those elements which are most crucial to existing brand familiarity, and alter them with caution and reasoned, informed consideration. Rebranding/brand freshening is necessary as styles and the marketplace change, and can have powerful and positive effects in the hands of a skilled team. Branding professionals worth their salt will clearly identify, however, stylistic elements that will help make a seamless transition.

When re-branding Air Life to AirLink, our agency created an entirely new logo that departed from the older, outdated logo. This was necessary due to trademark requirements and because AirLink needed a logo that differentiated it from the scores of other air ambulance services out there. However, we agreed with the wisdom of the staff that the triangular bumper sticker/window cling needed to carry over, as it was distinctive and recognizable. The new logo went onto a slightly altered triangular sticker design. This is an example of carrying over an element of brand for the sake of a smooth transition. There is danger in either ditch: not keeping your brand fresh and distinctive on the one hand, and making radical changes too quickly on the other.

Appropriateness

Any change to a brand must be done with an eye toward fitness of purpose. Appropriateness must be defined by the results of good research. Research must be executed with rigor, due diligence, and a commitment to finding answers to hard questions. And, at times, there can be situations where informed research serves mainly to guide what can still be an predominantly intuitive creative process. In other words, brand management is both a science and an art.

When hiring a professional or agency to conduct a brand audit and/or to rebrand your organization, look for: A) An excellent, organized process that includes your input at every step and B) A substantial portfolio of branding work (logos, names, taglines) as well as excellent testimonials/references.

Research & Reasoning

Good research drives everything. Good research isn't gospel for a brand freshening, but it is a valuable guide, and should give rise to much creative stimulation and valuable questioning. You and your agency should ask many, many questions during the research and discovery phase. Good research fosters a base for sound reasoning, rationale, and objectives, and can help immensely with determining what will be appropriate for a given project. Good research may tell you that a change is needed, or to leave things well enough alone.

If your brand is stale, you are going to lose potential customers and you risk loss of market share as fresher brands get more attention. If your brand is communicating something different than what you are, you are not going to attract the target customers you want. Invest time in assessing your brand—not only logo, name and tagline, but all the touchpoints of your brand, including every experience people will have through advertising, interactions with your staff and especially what others say about you. Remember that your brand is not what you think it is, but what they think it is. Make sure you are effectively sending the right message with a fresh, effective brand! 🟢