

Branding for Dropouts

A brand is more than just your logo and your business card. It's much more than your reputation or what people think about you or how you make them feel. A brand is how you make an effort beyond yourself—a company or project or just a professional persona—relatable on a human level.

For people that went to university, they largely live off of their uni's brand until they have enough experience and expertise of their own. For dropouts, we don't have that luxury. That's why creating a deeply resonating and emotionally connected brand is one of the most important things a dropout can do.

Background

First gather a little background on what you are branding—yourself, your company or your project. Even if you think you already know these answers it's important to commit them to paper. You'll see why later. A good place to start is with the 5Ws like in grade school: **Who** are you? **What** product or service can you generate? **Where** do you want to take this? **When** did it all begin? **Why** do you do it? **How** do you operate?

Appraisal

Next, you need to appraise your brand. Think about what a strong brand is to you. Write some examples of powerful brands? What characteristics make them powerful? How does your brand embody those characteristics? How might your brand be visionary, unique, engaging, or credible? It matters less whether or not your brand *is* these things—as powerful or motivating as apple for instance—and more what words you are using to describe this.

Resonance

Now let's talk about how your brand resonates with your audience. It's important to do this in two categories. First is positive and aspirational: How do you hope people think and feel about your brand? Next, spend some time thinking about unintended negative associations: How might people think and feel about your brand, despite your best efforts. Try to think about all the different contexts people would encounter your brand and how that might change your answers.

Pillars

I don't do values. Fuck that. Values are useless words you put on a poster on the wall and your employees roll their eyes at. Values are who we dream to be, but they lack the practical bridge for how to get there. Instead, I focus on pillars. A pillar is something that provides critical support. Together these pillars are the foundation of your brand.

Take a look at all the words on your paper so far, and see if you can identify any patterns, then split them up into three groups. This might be difficult, but you have to keep revisiting and justifying your groups. Once you have them all separated, come up with a word or phrase that sums up or represents that group. These three words are your pillars.

Pro Tip!

You might find it helpful to come up with phrase or statement that brings all three together.

Expression

All of this is great, but what good is it if you can't do anything with it. Well, the first step towards application is understanding how best to express those pillars. Brands come to life through language, ritual, and symbol. Given these pillars, how would they influence the words you use, or how you describe yourself? How might

it influence actions, processes, and the way you do things? What are some of the ways these pillars would be expressed in design? How would you show these pillars symbolically?

Application

Thinking through those different expression dynamics you just recorded, let's now look at how to apply them. Based on the different ways you felt these ideas would be expressed visually, verbally and experientially, now how does that impact specific elements of your brand? How would that impact your brand's name? Your logo? Your typography? What kind of themes might you see repeated? What media are you most likely to express your brand? Digital, print, textile? How do these expression dynamics transform across different media?

Bonus Tips & Best Practices

Unknown Knowns

Understand that the goal here is to uncover latent information—things that you know and may not realize that you know, not simply writing down your ideas about yourself or what you wish is true. The more you can get to authentic truths, the more powerful your brand will be.

Unconscious Bias

The subtle shifting of your brand toward what you want it to be, versus what is true is so powerful it is happening mostly subconsciously. In other words, don't trust yourself. Take the power of your brand a step further by having someone else run this process on you, not taking your words at face value, but looking for the truth. If you are running this on a client, make sure you are helping them find the truth, not just being a human google form.

What do you do?

In my opinion, this is the most important message to craft as it is the question asked most often. Most people's answer is something impotent, like "I'm a developer." or "I have a company that makes widgets." Or even myself for a long time I just said, "I run a brand-strategy firm." or "I'm a brand strategist."

This is a huge missed opportunity. Here is a perfect opportunity to drop a well-crafted value proposition. "We impact the subconscious of a companies audience to get them to act in ways that produce measurable results. We've created experiences for Adobe, merchandise for Tesla and office space for LinkedIn, and created over 150 new brands, and that was all just in the last year."

Which one lands better?

Pillars are Powerful

Take the time to get these right. As much as our clients have integrated them into the fabric of their brand expression and communications they have used it them as a sort of manifesto to return to and remember the foundation of the company. Taking the time, once you have arrived at what they are, to develop statements around each one to explain what they mean to you is a really valuable tool for helping inspire and motivate your team, get everyone on the same page about what's important, and even re-energize yourself when times are tough,

Don't mistake what brand is

Brand is a super abstract concept so it can be hard to wrap your mind around and tempting to make it more concrete. A brand is not it's assets. A brand is not its impact. A brand is not changed or tailored to its audience (you notice I didn't talk about your audience at all.) You as a person have what guiding principles, values, unspoken intangible drives and motivations. These are the things which guide our lives, as well as what we recognize and connect to in others. This is a huge part of what makes us human. Branding is an attempt to confer this level of humanity on a company, product or project in a way that allows it to connect with us like a friend.

Brand Messaging Worksheet

What do you do?

I help [ideal customer] do [ideal enagement]

Or I [problem you solve] for [customer you serve]

What is [your company]?

[your company] is a [type of company] that specializes in

[differentiator]. We have [examples of success/traction.]

Pillars

Describe what each pillar means to you.

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