A Practical Guide to B2B Branding Online
Introduction

While no one can deny the value of big consumer brands such as Nike, Coca-Cola, and Apple, people often contest the value of branding in the B2B space. Among the disbelievers are some B2B marketers who are most accustomed to living in a world governed by open rates, form submissions, and converted leads, and are sometimes unsure of how to approach the seemingly intangible concept of “branding.” How does the value of a B2B brand extend beyond logos, taglines, and the corporate style guide? Are there unique ways that marketers can use the Web to foster strong brands? Why does this matter? And what success metrics apply to branding when it comes to driving revenue for a B2B company?

A Practical Guide to B2B Branding Online is designed to help B2B marketers 1) understand branding’s impact on B2B sales, 2) develop a solid, online brand strategy, and 3) measure the real business impact of their branding efforts in the B2B world. Renowned B2B companies such as Intel, Boeing, American Express, and IBM have proven that developing your B2B brand is a worthwhile investment—but how can a B2B company of any size start down the path of achieving this type of brand value and impact? This guide will help you find out.

"The brand is a special intangible that in many businesses is the most important asset. This is because of the economic impact that brands have. They influence the choices of customers, employees, investors and government authorities. In a world of abundant choices, such influence is crucial for commercial success and creation of shareholder value." 1

What is branding?

Branding is the process by which a company or organization uses its identity and core values to differentiate itself from competitors, and establish itself as the clear choice in the minds of prospects and customers. Yes, branding is a strong logo and tagline, but it’s also much more than that. It is the way people perceive your company, products, or services and the emotions they experience when they think of your organization and its offerings. According to Philip Kotler, marketing professor at the Kellogg School of Business, “Brands are not only what a company sells, they represent what a company does and, more significantly, what a company is.” 2 Branding really becomes the foundation upon which companies exist. As the Guide uncovers, this notion firmly holds true in the B2B world.

The shift from offline to online brand advertising

No other marketing channel brings brands to life like advertising. Decades ago, television, radio, and

1 Rita Clifton and others. Brands and Branding. (United Kingdom: The Economist in association with Profile Books Ltd., 2009).

print advertising were the primary vehicles for brand advertising, but these were not cheap ventures. The enormous financial investments required by these channels meant that brand advertising was limited only to the large companies and agencies that could afford it.

Fast forward to today. Online advertising has leveled the playing field, making it easy for businesses of all sizes to foster their brands through advertising. From banner ads and paid search advertising to contextual and cookie-based, targeted advertising, these methods have brought forth entirely new ways for companies to engage their prospects and customers, and have dramatically improved the relevancy of brand advertising in the B2B world. In his book *Brand Leadership*, brand guru David A. Aaker suggests that the Internet gives brands the distinct opportunity to provide a personalized experience to prospects every time—an obvious advantage over offline advertising. “The Web can create a virtual brand tailored to each visitor, allowing the associations to be more intense and thereby create a stronger brand bond.”

**There’s more to online advertising metrics than clicks**

For many companies, online advertising has become more attractive than its offline counterpart because the Internet offers “instant” insight into online metrics such as clicks and click-through rates, which are absent in traditional print, radio, and television media. Online marketers tend to gravitate to the click as a success metric because results are immediate and easy to calculate. However, the click can be a misleading metric, especially in B2B marketing. First, “clickers” are not always the best customers. According to Linda Anderson, vice president of marketing solutions at comScore:

> “Today, marketers who attempt to optimize their advertising campaigns solely around the click are assigning no value to the 84 percent of Internet users who don’t click on an ad. That’s precisely the wrong thing to do, because other comScore research has shown that non-clicked ads can also have a significant impact. As a result, savvy marketers are moving to an evaluation of the impact that all ad impressions – whether clicked or not – have on consumer behavior, mirroring the manner in which traditional advertising has been measured for decades using reach and frequency metrics.”

Thus, clicks and click-through rates comprise only one piece of the metrics puzzle when it comes to banner or display advertising. These metrics do not account for the impact of branding, which can often influence a sale through its ability to drive awareness, trust, credibility, and more. While branding requires a commitment to measure results over time, the effort is worth it. Even

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the most die-hard online marketers should consider using traditional metrics such as reach, frequency, and Gross Rating Point (see the “Common Brand Advertising Metrics” diagram) when measuring the success of their online campaigns, since these metrics offer a more accurate view of display advertising’s impact on overall marketing ROI.

**Common Brand Advertising Metrics**

**Share of Voice (SOV)**
A measure of the number of unique individuals reached in your target divided by the total population available in your target across an entire network. (SOV is also often defined as “Reach”). NOTE: Share of Voice is even more meaningful if you can measure it across your target business demographic segment(s).

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\text{Share of Voice} = \frac{\text{Uniques (sample population)}}{\text{Uniques Available (total population)}}
\]

**Frequency**
The number of times your ad is exposed to a group of unique individuals.

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\text{Frequency} = \frac{\text{Impressions}}{\text{Uniques}}
\]

**Gross Rating Point (GRP)**
A measure of the influence opportunity of a campaign.

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\text{Gross Rating Point} = \text{Reach} \times \text{Frequency}
\]
Branding in the B2B world
To understand branding’s value in the B2B space, think about the last purchase you made as a consumer. Maybe it was a candy bar, a television, or a new car. While the decision to buy the candy bar may have been somewhat impulsive, the choices to purchase a certain television or automobile likely took a bit more time and preparation. In most cases, the buying process was longer because of the kind of investment you were making (i.e. large-ticket items that have long-term lifestyle effects).

Now think of the last purchase you made for your company. B2B purchases are almost never “candy bar” purchases, and for the same reason—they tend to be expensive and require long-term commitment from organizations to ensure their success. Furthermore, the typical B2B buying process is more complex, often involving more than one person in the decision-making process. Considering these points, what role does branding play in the B2B sales cycle?

Branding prepares prospects for the buying decision.
Let’s say you go into a store looking to purchase a pack of pens for your home office, and are fully prepared to choose between the BIC and Paper Mate brands. However, next to these big brands is WriteWell, a new product on the market. You saw an ad for WriteWell the day before, and recall that it has high-quality ink and is more comfortable to write with than other brands. Because you were exposed to the brand earlier, you’ll probably be more likely to give this new product a chance.

Now let’s move this purchasing decision into the B2B world. You’re asked to weigh in on ordering a case of pens for your office, and WriteWell pens are now available in addition to the brand your office usually purchases. You may have seen an ad for WriteWell the day before, but this doesn’t matter as much in the B2B scenario. What does matter is:

- You’ve seen WriteWell ads in multiple places frequented by business professionals in your industry.
- A few of your co-workers just bought a few WriteWell pens for themselves and like using them.
- You’ve tried a WriteWell pen yourself and like using it as well.
- Your supervisor’s old pen just leaked on her desk and you heard her exclaim “I’m tired of these pens! Please find me something better.”
In this scenario, the WriteWell brand has reached you through multiple touch points. You like using WriteWell pens. You’ve gotten validation from your colleagues that WriteWell is a reliable brand. And there is now a clear business challenge for you to solve that could positively impact your chance for a promotion (albeit indirectly). In this instance, branding and buyer need converge, and thanks to the multi-pronged exposure you’ve had to the WriteWell brand, you are now fully prepared to buy these pens.

**Emotions run high in B2B sales and branding helps eliminate the feeling of risk.**
You may start to wonder what’s so emotional about a B2B purchase. And the answer is—a whole lot. Just because we enter into an office building and put on our “work hats” doesn’t mean we lose our ability to feel a certain way about the choices and decisions we make. In fact, there’s arguably more at stake with B2B purchases. B2B decision makers can face an enormous amount of pressure because there is a large amount of potential risk involved—to the organization, to their job security and personal credibility, and so on. Because strong emotions such as fear and risk exist, B2B prospects want to know that they’re making the best possible choice and branding helps provide this feeling of reassurance.

**B2B brands impact the perceptions and emotions of everyone involved in the buying process.**
Because of the complexity involved in the typical B2B buying process (not to mention the large financial investment), there tends to be more than one person involved in the decision making. This “buying committee,” as it is often referred to, can be comprised of a number of evaluators, influencers, and decision makers with different roles and backgrounds (C-level executives, IT, Finance, etc.)

B2B branding must do its best to first identify the business demographics of those on the buying committee, and then address these specific demographics by appealing to their specific perceptions and emotions. The more personal and relevant the branded experience, the more likely the prospect is to respond. For example, what sort of risk would a director of IT potentially be taking by investing in a specific software product? Similarly, what are the potential objections that a CFO might have to a certain B2B purchase? By considering the different audiences that have an impact on a buying decision, B2B companies can better target their brand advertising to uniquely address the concerns and mindsets of these different individuals.

**A strong B2B brand is one that prospects view as the best choice to address their business challenge.**
B2B buyers are overwhelmed with choices, making it imperative for companies to use brand advertising as a
vehicle for competitive differentiation. By establishing a strong brand through advertising, companies can carve out a space for themselves in the mindshare of their prospects and customers. Fortunately, display advertising is an easy way to “look bigger than you are,” an advantage that can make a tremendous difference during the consideration or evaluation stage of the B2B sales cycle. “Branding must aspire to reach out and appeal to an individual’s emotions, rather than assume they function on an entirely rational and logical level. Business brands should not simply aim to communicate functionality of the products or service (so-called hygiene factors): they must seek to differentiate the organization and its products or services.”

Using B2B Brands to Strengthen the Path to Revenue

B2B brands play a significant role at every stage of the sales funnel. This is most easily demonstrated through display advertising, one of the only marketing channels that can influence B2B buyers at every step of the buying process. While other marketing channels such as search and email are most useful for targeting prospects in later stages of the sales cycle, display advertising influences the B2B purchasing process from start to finish.

Awareness

On the most basic level, prospects will never choose a product or service if they are not even aware that it exists. In this scenario, advertising is necessary to create basic brand awareness. If B2B companies make little to no investment in developing their brands, they provide their competitors with the easiest opportunity to win. As discussed earlier in the section “Branding prepares prospects for the buying decision,” the more prospects and customers are exposed to a brand, the greater likelihood there is that they will purchase something from that brand. As B2B companies begin to establish their brands over time, display advertising can help capture new mindshare and reinforce existing messages, creating deeper levels of awareness as their prospects move along the sales funnel to the next stage.

Interest/Engagement

After becoming aware of a product or service, a B2B prospect then begins to demonstrate interest and become more engaged. Ask any B2B marketer to define “engagement” and you’ll probably come up with a variety of different responses. For some, engagement is a way to measure how a prospect interacts with a website, whether by clicking on an ad, reading an article, playing an online game, and so on. Essentially, all of these online activities are very different behaviors, and being “engaged” can thus be measured in various ways.

Regardless of the engagement metrics a B2B company chooses, one thing is certain—when people engage with

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brands online, they build strong relationships with companies. And in the B2B world, strong relationships open the door to increased revenue. As David A. Aaker writes, “If your website can motivate customers to really get to know the brand (that is, learn about its heritage, symbols, and values), a deeper relationship should result.” When B2B companies use their brands to cultivate relationships with prospects and customers during the Interest/Engagement stage, they increase their opportunities for new and repeat business.

**Perception/Consideration**

When buyers are flooded with options, display ads play an important role in competitive differentiation. During the Perception/Consideration stage of the sales funnel, prospects have an idea of what they want and need, but are open to considering a variety of brands to solve their specific business challenges. At this point, a B2B company needs to use its marketing to address its prospects with the intention of changing their perception of the brand, essentially creating a world in which there is no other good choice or “safe bet.” “Marketing activities are undertaken with the goal of changing or reinforcing the consumer ‘mindset’ in some way. This includes thoughts, feelings, experiences, images, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards a brand.”

While emotion plays a constant role in the B2B sales process, it is perhaps most prevalent during this stage. If the B2B solutions, products, or services under evaluation have very similar features or functions, it is up to the brands to establish a competitive advantage by appealing to the emotions and concerns of the prospects in the most unique and relevant ways possible. A company can use display advertising at this stage to influence brand perception, linking its brand to certain attributes in the mind of the prospect (e.g. efficiency, reliability, exceptional customer service, etc.), and ultimately establishing itself as the most sensible choice.

**Decision**

Reaching the Decision stage is the goal of all B2B companies, when the prospect becomes a customer, or a customer becomes a repeat customer. While it may be tempting to believe that a brand’s job is done at this point, nothing could be farther from the truth. Even if agreements have been made, prospects can always change their minds and reconsider their options. Brands still play a significant role during this stage, reaffirming that your customers made the right decision and that you can continue to provide them with the business solutions they need to succeed in the long term. Strong B2B brands can also help prospects remember how happy they are with their purchase, which can influence retention, as well as cross- and up-sell opportunities.

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6 Essential Tactics for Unlocking the Value of Your B2B Brand

Now that we've established the importance and role of brand in the B2B world, let's now dive into some real-world ways you can start strengthening your B2B brand and using it to drive revenue at your organization.

1. Establish your company's brand identity with the goals of building relationships and preparing prospects to buy.

One of the goals of the B2B sales process is to build a solid relationship between company and prospect. Your brand is a major opportunity to strengthen this relationship on a functional and emotional level. Because your brand identity represents who your company is, think about the tenets that you want your brand to express. Are there certain beliefs that your company stands for? What emotions do you want your brand to evoke from prospects, customers, the media, etc.? And remember, the role of branding in the B2B world is to prepare the prospect to buy. Put yourself in the shoes of people who have never heard of your brand. What qualities of your brand would help them discover the value of your product or service? Gather together key stakeholders internally and brainstorm a list of keywords and concepts that you believe best describe your brand. Once you have this list, organize it by topics and use this to inform how you will communicate your brand identity—through your logo, tagline, advertising, marketing communications, social media contributions, and more. The more you infuse all of your marketing activities with your brand identity, the stronger the bond your prospects and customers will feel toward your company and its products and services. Below is a sample keyword exercise for a fictitious commercial realty company.

**ABC Commercial Realtors – Key Brand Concepts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Service</th>
<th>Unparalleled Expertise</th>
<th>Widest Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reliable</td>
<td>• More than 30 years</td>
<td>• Largest number of properties available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Professional</td>
<td>• Broad range of expertise</td>
<td>• National and local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledgeable</td>
<td>• Fortune 500 to SMB</td>
<td>• For sale and for lease options</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Know—and find—your target audience.

Branding is in the eye of the beholder. All of the prospects on your typical buying committee will not perceive your brand in the same way, especially if their business demographics are different. For example, let’s say your product plays a role in helping medical device manufacturers design and build their products. In your typical sales process, there are a variety of people involved in the decision-making process, representing the engineering, IT, finance, and executive functions. While the entire company will benefit from using your product, the everyday design issues facing the engineers differ from the compliance concerns with which the C-level executives are concerned. As such, it would probably make more sense for you to target the innovative design features of your brand to the engineers, and save your key messages on compliance for the CEO and CFO.

Once you’ve determined the business demographics of your buying committee, incorporate this information into every marketing and media opportunity you do. Work with your vendors or technology providers to find and segment only the audiences in which you’re interested. Just as you wouldn’t exhibit at a tradeshow that didn’t attract the right attendees, avoid sending email campaigns out to massive lists that aren’t well segmented. Similarly, make sure your banner and display advertising is highly targeted. Today’s technologies enable marketers to show their ads only to the right business audience. When this happens, no ad impression is wasted, and prospects are more likely to convert into leads because the advertising messages are more relevant. Before investing dollars into any marketing activity, make sure you’re able to target the right prospects in different ways to make your brand more meaningful to the right people.
Communicate your company’s key messages and competitive advantage through your brand.

A brand is more than just a pretty face. Your B2B brand enables you to communicate your company’s value proposition and core messages while impacting the way the world feels about your company and the products and/or services you offer (brand perception). If you have positioning and messaging documents in place, be sure to have these inform your brand strategy. For instance, if one of your key messages focuses on superior customer service, ask yourself if your brand evokes feelings of friendliness, dependability, and so on. By consistently integrating your B2B brand with your overall marketing strategy, you’ll reinforce your key values and messages to prospects and customers at every opportunity.

For greater impact, identify your target audience’s key business demographics such as industry, company size, functional area, and more, and use this data to inform your marketing activities.
You can also use your B2B brand as a competitive differentiator. Ask yourself why prospects and customers should buy from you versus your competitors, and make sure your brand conveys these reasons in every outward facing communication, whether it's your website, marketing collateral, or speaking opportunities.

**Drive more qualified leads with your brand by combining display advertising with search marketing.**

Display advertising and search are perfect companions when it comes to evangelizing B2B brands. As display ads increase your prospects' awareness levels, the more likely they'll be to search for your brand when it comes time to look for the product or solution you offer. According to a comScore study, “display advertising, despite a lack of clicks, can have a significant positive impact on the likelihood of consumers conducting a search query using the advertiser’s branded terms (a lift of at least 38% over a four week period).”

In this sense, an investment in display advertising doubles as an investment in organic search, which consistently provides some of the most qualified leads because these prospects are seeking you out rather than vice versa. Moreover, when it comes to actual conversions, the display and search combination is equally powerful. According to the Atlas Institute, “users exposed to both search and display convert at an even higher rate – 22 percent better than search alone.”

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Use your B2B brand to increase email conversions.

Showcasing a B2B brand through display advertising is a great way to increase email response and conversion rates. Before renting an email list for a set of subscribers in your target market, see if there’s an opportunity to reach these same eyeballs through display ad campaigns running before, during, and after the email blast date. This is an excellent way to reinforce your brand awareness through multiple channels, and in doing so, you’ll “warm” them up to being more receptive and responsive to your email campaign.
Place your brand where your prospects are and incorporate retargeting.

Regardless of what stage in the sales cycle your prospects are in, your B2B brand can always help increase their awareness levels and establish your company’s presence as a leader. Ensure that you’ve established a firm presence in all of the marketing channels in which you participate, whether it’s display advertising, email, search, tradeshows, and so on.

Thanks to the Internet, big brands are no longer limited to those with big budgets. For example, the display advertising channel also offers you a unique opportunity to “be everywhere” quite easily through retargeting. If you’re not already familiar with it, retargeting is the ability to offer your prospects relevant display ads after they’ve left your website. By visiting your site, these prospects have already demonstrated an interest in your offerings, and even if they don’t convert immediately, retargeting lets you maintain your online presence with them by showing them relevant ads wherever they are on the Web. What’s more, when you combine retargeting with the ability to show your ads only to the right business demographics, overall ROI increases dramatically because you’re no longer spending money to advertise to the wrong audience.

Retargeting is an effective way to increase brand awareness and conversion rates after prospects have left your website.
Conclusion
Branding is the ultimate opportunity for your B2B company to make its mark on the world, to influence prospects at every stage of the sales cycle (especially as they prepare themselves for the purchase), and to ultimately drive revenue by demonstrating that your product or service is the only right choice in the market.

To develop a successful brand strategy in the B2B world, be sure to:

- Understand who your target business demographics are and the different ways in which they’ll perceive your brand.
- Find and segment this target audience with every outbound marketing program you do to ensure your brand reaches only the prospects that matter to your business.
- Consider the multiple touch points available for promoting your brand and how to holistically use them to prepare prospects for the purchasing decision.
- Communicate your company’s positioning and core messages through your brand.
- Integrate your brand strategy across all of your marketing channels, from display advertising to search to email.
- Measure the value of your brand “beyond the click” by looking at how your display advertising impacts conversions through all of your marketing channels.
- Use your B2B brand to strengthen every stage of the sales funnel.

An investment in your brand is an investment in the foundation of your entire marketing mix, and ultimately in the growth and future of your company. In the B2B world, branding simply makes good business sense.