

# Making a brand on a tight budget

Google has become the world's most valuable brand, without spending a cent on advertising. Here are a few keys to building your brand without breaking the bank.

Text: Thebe Ikalfeng

## What is a brand?

Simply put, a brand is a promise made and kept. When people start a business with the idea of marketing a product or service, they're actually selling far more – indeed, the promise of fulfilled expectations. How well your company fulfills the perceived need will determine the strength of its brand.

One of the best examples of "a promise kept" is the Coca-Cola brand. Since 1886, the Coca-Cola company has promised consumers a bottle of the same great-tasting drink, within arm's reach. The company felt consumers' wrath in 1982 when it adjusted the formula of Coca-Cola. Why were they so angry? The promise of the same great taste had been broken – and the company quickly had to change it back.

In South Africa, cellular service provider MTN promises connectivity "everywhere you go", both geographically and in terms of your progress in life. If MTN fails to deliver on this promise, it risks losing clients to rival networks. Today's consumer has far too much choice to tolerate broken brand promises.

## Does branding begin only when you've got money to hire an expert?

Branding begins the very moment you conceive the idea of selling a product or service. Many start-up businesses make the serious mistake of thinking that branding is a separate activity. But the reality is that the very second you decide on a product or service, you are embarking on building a brand. The secret is to do it right.

Every time someone comes in contact with your company or offering, it's an opportunity to build your brand. Ensuring that staff members are well informed regarding your product and are competent and friendly does not cost money, but neglecting these areas can do serious damage to your brand. Gaining valuable media

exposure through media relations efforts doesn't have to cost a cent.

Building a strong brand is not just about money. Google, the world's most valuable brand, has never spent a single dollar on advertising, but it has taken advantage of word-of-mouth marketing. Make your promise and keep it – that's the most fundamental key to building a strong brand.

You can also take advantage of the experience of others by reading books and downloading case studies, articles, and other resources from the Internet – [www.brandchannel.com](http://www.brandchannel.com) or [www.leadingbrands.org](http://www.leadingbrands.org) are great places to start.

If you're in business, you have a brand. The difference is at what stage of development it is and the affinity that your target market has with it; the position it has in their hearts and minds.

A brand is quite simply a promise to customers – and it's not so much what you say as the way in which they perceive it. Your challenge is to shape their perception of your brand so that you gain the advantage over your competitors.

## Is there a difference between branding and marketing?

Marketing is the function of building brands. It is the practice, the how of building brands. At its most basic level, marketing is about identifying the target market, offering a product at the right price, place and time, and figuring out how best to communicate the offering to them. How you package all of this in a compelling manner that differentiates you from the competition – the wrapping paper and bow – this is branding.

## Is my marketing budget not better invested in product development or staff training?

The fundamental assumption of good branding is, first

and foremost, that you have a product or service that meets the particular needs of a specific target market. Therefore, it's absolutely vital that you invest enough money in your offering to ensure that it meets the rational and emotional needs of your customers.

The reason that branding is so important today is because there are so many products and services that promise to do the same thing. What branding does is create a halo around your offering. When it's unwrapped, your product may be exactly the same as those of your competitors. But the key is to make your target market believe that, by choosing your brand, they're gaining something they would not have with a competitor product. We're now in the territory of emotion – and people are willing to pay a premium for the high of purchasing a product or service that they believe to be "better".

For example, Kulula, Mango and 1 Time are all low-cost airlines. The difference between them is the buzz that Kulula has created around the idea that anyone can fly and it offers the best such experience. It has also gone into the market and integrated existing services such as hotels and car hire into its service offering in order to enhance the experience. But all three airlines will get you to your destination. The difference is the way they make you feel.

Your offering may not be any different from those of your competitors, but the trick lies in convincing customers that your propositions are wildly different.

### Are there any cost-effective – preferably free – ways of building brands?

Yes, but you have to get your focus right first.

The whole concept of branding is about focus and priorities. The best brands do three things well. Firstly, they are focused on crafting a proposition that implies an intimate understanding of their target market.

Secondly, they're consistent in communicating their brand promise. Great brands are all about enduring promises. Trust is built over a long time – and in order to become a truly great brand, customers need to have the same, fabulous experience with your brand, no matter when or where they come into contact with it.

Thirdly, great brands are leaders in their fields. It's wise to choose the area you want to dominate. For example, Mc Donald's chose to focus on burgers, not drinks – it brought Coca-Cola in to fulfil that need.

Once you've got these fundamentals figured out, prioritise your spending – and take advantage of all the free resources out there.

- Go online. There's so much to learn from others who've done before what you're trying to do. What you're

trying to do is figure out how to do the same thing a little differently. There are plenty of websites that make valuable branding information available for free as a marketing ploy. Take advantage!

- Develop a clear, compelling corporate identity for your business. For example, with Coca-Cola, the colour red, the cursive font, the iconic bottle – these graphic devices have stood the test of time. Remember, the key is to apply your distinctive corporate identity across all elements, with great attention to consistency. Sloppy application implies a sloppy brand.

- Invest in quality stationery bearing your corporate identity. Business cards and letterheads are very important. Most other documents, including corporate profiles and brochures, can be produced in electronic format. Ensure that product packaging is of a reasonable quality and that it fits with your brand.

- Design an easy-to-use website that clearly communicates your value proposition. The Internet offers numerous free and cheap ways of communicating your brand.

- Public relations, including media relations, are also highly effective ways of building your brand. Build relationships with journalists who may be interested in writing about your company, sponsor or host events that build your brand image in the eyes of your target market, and give back to the community that supports you through targeted social interventions.

After all, when it comes to branding, what goes around comes around. Every time.

- *Thebe Ikalafeng (below) is group MD of multi-disciplinary brand strategy, design and public relations group The Brand Leadership Group – [www.brand-leadership.com](http://www.brand-leadership.com). He also founded Africa's first online forum for thought leadership on brands, [www.leadingbrands.org](http://www.leadingbrands.org)*

