

Marketing Ain't About the Logo! It's About Your Story

Marketing is about the story you tell your customers, and the stories they tell about you. If there's a big gap between who you say you are and who customers say you are, you have a problem.

I can't tell you how many times I hear people talk about marketing as branding, logos, and collateral. And design firms – oh wonderful design firms. Many of them are quite talented. But let me say this loud and clear: It's not about the graphics, the logo and the design! That is *not* marketing! Saying it doesn't make it so.

I had a wonderful and warm prospect with beautiful collateral, website, and logos. He had spent tens of thousands of dollars on them. I asked him how his “branding” was working. It wasn't. His firm was close to bankruptcy this past year.

His material didn't SAY anything. Sure it was beautiful, and it was also jargon-laden with cryptic taglines. I asked him what his customers said and he admitted many of his customers don't “get it.” If your customers don't understand your marketing, then why keep using the same strategies? His response, “Well, the design firm said.....”

Stop right there! It ain't about the logo (yes, we're using incorrect grammar to capture the urgency of the point, and thus, your attention. Correct colloquial diction will not do here)! Yes, there are design firms that understand messaging and then there are ones that don't – the kind this prospect used. When your customers don't understand your messaging, when your benefits are unclear, when your jargon is out of control, and your differentiation is lost – you have a MARKETING problem! There are no points for being clever; there are no inside jokes in marketing! If your customer has to ask you what you are about, they're already gone. The burden of clear communications is NOT on them; it's on YOU. Test your branding first with your ideal, profitable customers. If they don't get it, junk it. Go back to your story – that's where the inspiration for branding starts.

For a fraction of what this prospect spent on branding, he could have shored up his message and moved the needle in his business. Instead, he thought having fancy collateral WAS marketing. The hardest part about this scenario is being right. I told him two years ago he needed to change his message, but a web design firm took all his budget and delivered nothing but beautiful designs – no message based on any market research. When I last saw him, he lamented that I was right. That doesn't make me feel great especially because I like this prospect very much. In fact, I could have helped him for a lot less than he spent and he would have seen better results.

Branding and logos are NOT the heart of marketing. It ain't about the logo! Branding is based on the essence of who you are; it's your customer story. Your promise to your customers of the kinds of service you offer and the benefits you deliver – that's the heart of your message. I don't care what your logo looks like. It doesn't matter if I don't get what you do for me! Can you have aesthetic design and great messaging? Absolutely, but your brand starts with your messaging. Not the other way around. You never start with a design and logo in mind and "back" into your story. Rather, good design springs from the essence of your story.

Another problem is the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality: "Well, all my competitors have these buzzwords, so I have to have them to be in the same competitive space." And if your competitors were to jump off the bridge, would you? Ahem! Jargon hurts you because it doesn't connect you with your customer. Instead of keeping up with your competition, you should be kicking their behinds. And the best way to do that is to do what they AREN'T doing: using clear, concise messaging that communicates the story of how you help customers. You never stand out by following the herd.

Stop spending tons on branding. If money is tight, the number one thing you must do is update your messaging. Is your story the right one? Has your market changed? Have your customers' needs changed? Is the story you are telling the RIGHT one for the current climate? This does not have to cost lots of money, and it is far more effective than spending on "design" work.

Many businesses fall into this trap. They spend lots of money to look good and forget about how they SOUND. When you go to a networking event, what do you SAY about your business? That's what matters. Most businesses fail because they don't have a compelling story that resonates with their audience.

So forget jargon and logos for now. Yes, logos and branding are important (jargon never is!), but not as important as the center of your marketing – your *story*.

Now that's *my* story...and I'm sticking to it.

Kathy Klotz-Guest, MA, MBA, MLA, is a marketing strategist and storyteller with over 18 years' experience. Today she helps companies innovate great products and develop authentic "stand out" stories that connect with customers. By leading successful product development, marketing strategy, and communications efforts, Kathy helps companies increase revenues while decreasing marketing costs. With 20 years' experience in improvisation, she speaks and writes extensively on the fun-creativity-innovation connection. She has an MLA from Stanford University and an MBA from UC Berkeley. Kathy is also a founding fellow and CFO for the Society for the New Communications Research (snrc.org) new media think tank. Reach her at Kathy@powerfullyfunny.com or 408.578.8040.