

Jump-Start Your Brand

Whether you're a small operation or a multinational conglomerate, having a strong brand helps differentiate your agency and make it memorable to potential customers. Building a brand is not a complicated task, but it takes time. There are no shortcuts, but there are steps you can take to get a fast start:


1. Do Your Homework. Develop a plan that will guide your branding efforts and make sure you stay on track. A good brand plan consists of the essential information that will help you make decisions about future branding efforts. It should include:

- **Market** – Have a firm grasp of the market realities in the industry and in your geographic location. This includes competition and other factors that influence people's decision to seek your services.
- **Audience** – Who are your primary and secondary target audiences/customers? What are their general attitudes and perceptions about the industry and your agency? How are they likely to obtain information about your company?
- **Brand Proposition** – Describe what you bring to the table. What makes you different and better than your competitors? What is your mission? This is where you define your niche. Be creative and avoid clichés like having the best service. That is a meaningless assertion than nearly anyone can make; try to find something that only you can say.
- **Budget** – Have a realistic idea of your budget. The idea of jump-starting implies injecting a surge of energy, or money, to get things moving. Your marketing costs will level off over time, but you should plan for some extra expenditures in the short term.

2. Create an Identity. An identity is both a visual and philosophical representation of your brand that will help customers remember you. Referring to your brand plan, think of your brand proposition. Can you sum it up in a short message? What is the one thing you want potential customers to think of when they think of you? Use this key message to create a catchy tagline to capture the essence of your brand. The second part of your identity is the visual part. A logo, color palette and other graphic elements will help define your brand and make you instantly recognizable.

One of the best examples of a powerful brand identity is Nike and its "Just Do It" tagline. The tagline communicates the brand proposition in just three words, while the Swoosh logo is instantly recognizable. You may not have Nike's multimillion-dollar marketing budget, but you can have the same results on a smaller scale.

3. Get It Out There. With your brand identity in place, now start telling your story. Your brand plan should include information about how your customers are likely to obtain information about your agency. Use that information to develop communication vehicles that reach your target audiences. You also can deliver your brand through your Web site, brochures, business cards and stationery, newsletters and e-newsletters, advertising and promotional items. Whatever you do, make sure everything is consistent. All of your materials should be working together, using the same logo, colors and messages so the audience gets a clear, memorable picture of who you are.

4. Keep It Up. Building a brand is a long-term process. Once your surge of activity to jump-start your brand is over, don't stop your efforts. Maintain a constant level of activity, staying consistent with your brand identity, and your brand will get stronger every time your audience interacts with it. 

Christopher Thiede (chris@buildcommunications.com) is president of Build Communications LLC.

Carrier Branding Connection: Encompass Insurance

Encompass Insurance has two audiences: both the independent agency and the consumer. The company focuses on helping agencies brand themselves and, in turn, the agencies help promote the carrier to their clients, according to Encompass President Cynthia Young.



Cynthia Young, president, Encompass Insurance

"From a branding perspective, we believe—and research supports this—that most consumers in the independent agency channel first identify with the agency's brand, and that's before identifying with the company brand," Young says. "We want to help our agencies be successful in driving consumers to their agency. And once the consumer is in the agency, we then want the agency to consider and quote whenever possible the Encompass brand. So it's the agency that is promoting and standing behind the Encompass brand and all the things that differentiate us in the marketplace."

Encompass has a team of sales professionals who work in the field with agents to identify tools that help drive consumers to their agencies. These include a direct mail program, programs that geographically pinpoint a high-potential market area, Web-based prospecting tools, analytical tools that help agencies understand the consumers they should focus on and programs that win back former policyholders and increase cross-sell opportunities.

"We truly believe that supporting agency branding and favorably positioning ourselves with our offering within an agency's office is a powerful combination," Young says.

Trusted Choice® also plays a vital role in the company's branding efforts. "There is a lot of power in having one unified brand that qualifying independent agencies can use to promote the channel," Young says. "When consumers understand the choice, the value and the advocacy that independent agencies bring, we think this sets the stage for the agency to overlay their own particular brand identity."

—Jennifer Sikorski