Brand image vs brand identity, what is the difference?

Category: Branding
written by Stewart Hodgson | 25 January 2024
Brand image vs brand identity: Is there really a difference? Both concepts are aligned with “perceptions”, and how people view, think, and feel about your brand.

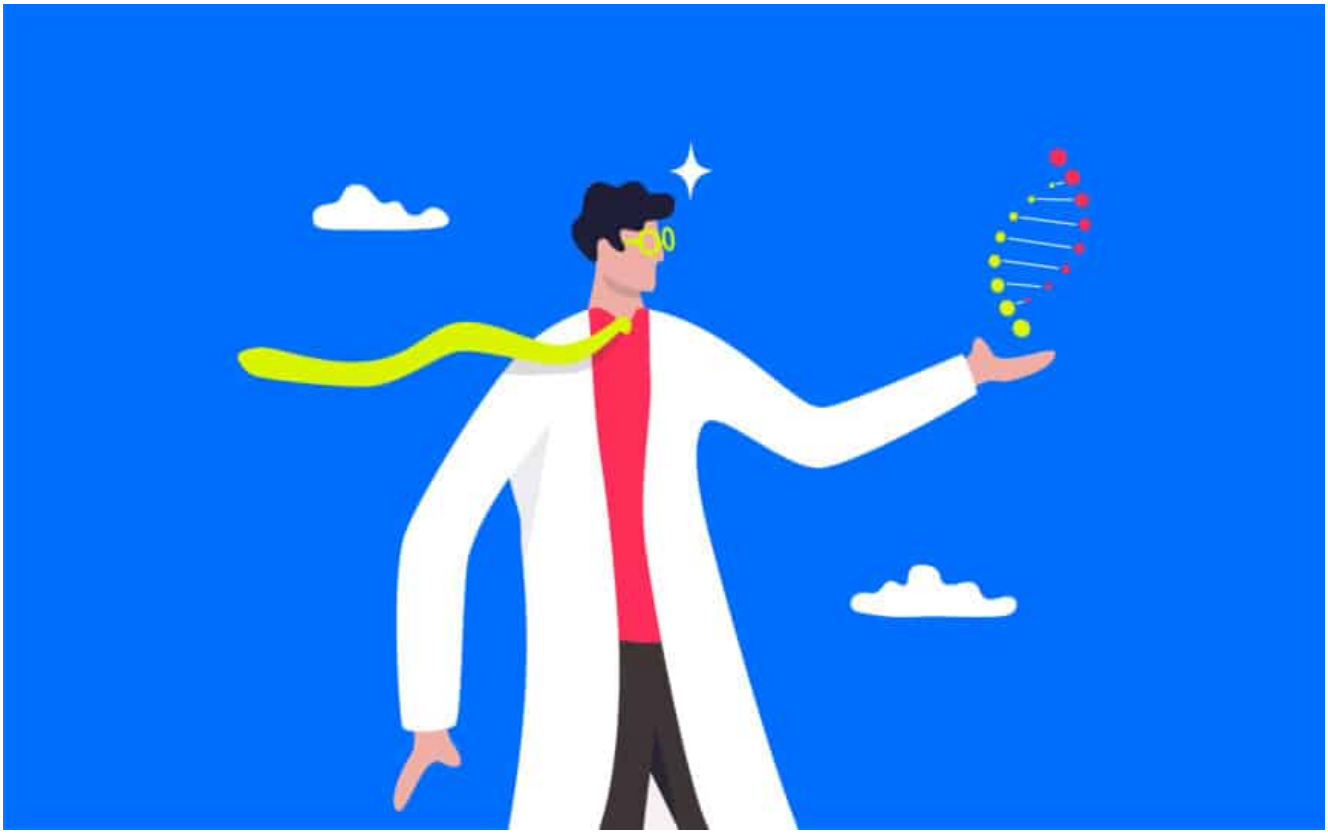
However, the fact that it’s possible to have a good brand identity, and a bad image, shows there’s more to these ideas than you might think.

The reality is you only have complete control over one thing: your brand identity. Your brand image is based on the perspectives of your customers.

While you can use your brand identity (alongside other factors) to shape the opinions of your target audience, you can only contribute to the image they see.

Confused?

Let’s take a deep dive into the meaning of brand image, and brand identity, the major differences between the concepts, and how you can align them, to unlock brand success.



Brand image vs brand identity: What is brand identity?

Let's start with the brand element you have control over — your identity. Your brand identity is essentially the "DNA" of your company. Just like a human being's identity (or DNA) is shaped by a range of factors, a brand's identity is made up of many different things.

A strong brand identity aligns all of the following factors:

- **Brand mission and vision:** The reason you started your company, and the goals you want to accomplish should shape everything you do. Your vision and mission dictate which products you create, what customers you target and even your marketing strategy.
- **Visual identity:** Your brand's logo, color scheme, and the photos or visual assets you use in marketing also shape a component of your brand's identity. They're part

of how customers recognize you, and how you convey information about your business.

- **Brand values:** The core values that guide your company are a huge part of your identity. They're how you make an emotional connection with your customers, and make decisions throughout your company's growth that align with your priorities.
- **Offerings and unique selling points:** The products and services you sell, and what differentiates them from competitors, is crucial to a strong brand identity. Define why customers should choose your business over another.
- **Your marketing mix:** Your marketing mix, which includes your brand positioning, messaging and tone of voice, and go-to-market strategy, also help to identify your business, and separate it from other companies in your industry.



Why is brand identity important?

So, why is brand identity important? The simple answer is that without it, you have no chance of influencing how customers see your company.

If you, your employees, and the marketing team you work with aren't familiar with the core elements of your brand DNA, how can you share them with your target audience? Defining your brand identity is how you determine exactly what you want to portray to your customers.

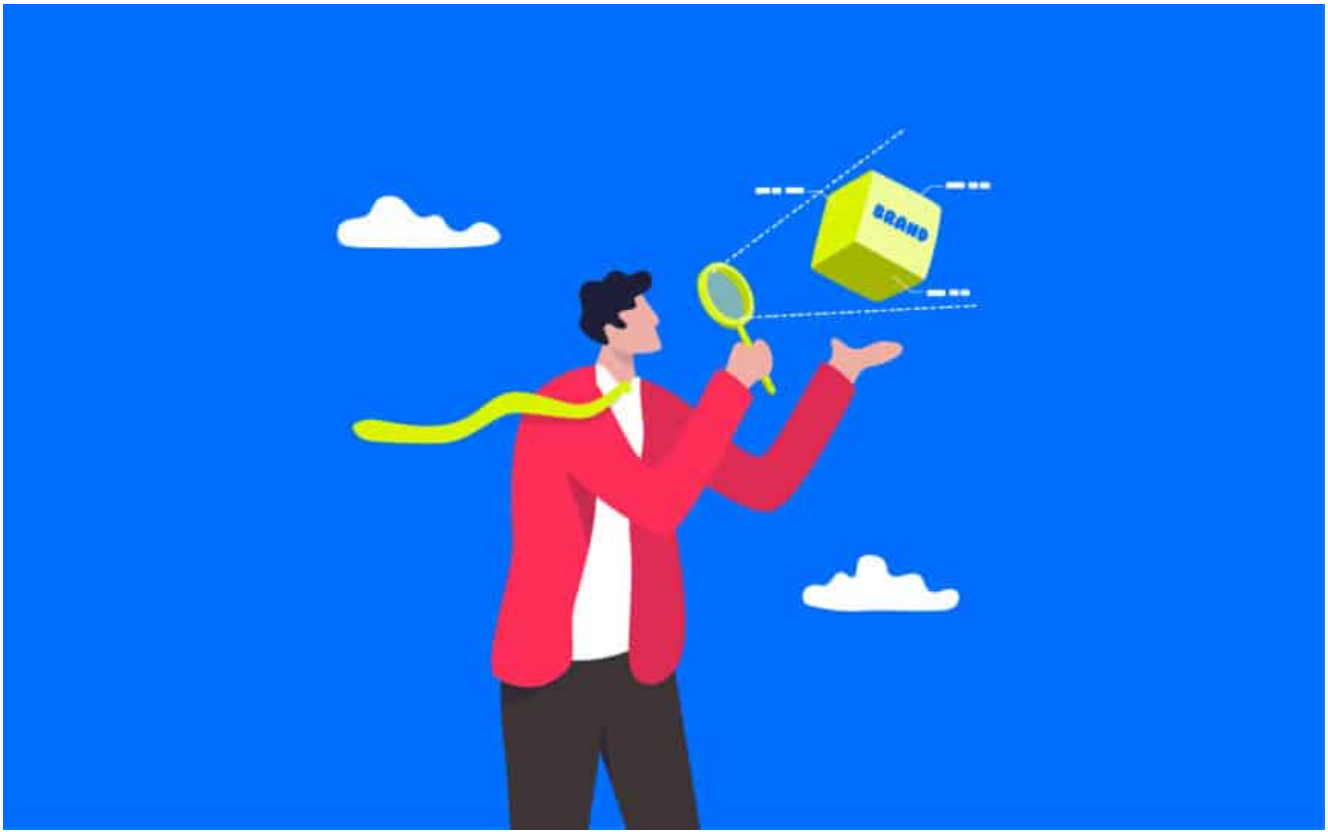
It's the key to figuring out what your brand should look like when you're creating logos, packaging designs and marketing materials. It's also essential to figure out which unique selling points you want to highlight, and how you want to communicate with existing and new customers.

Creating all the core components of your brand identity, such as your mission statement, editorial guidelines, and even a brand mood board, gives you and your team direction.

It ensures you can elevate your brand power, by consistently showcasing the same voice, image, and set of values, building deeper relationships with your customers.

For instance, look at the Disney brand. It wants prospective customers to see it as an innovator, a creator, and a source of magic. To shape this perception, Disney uses an eye-catching logo, complete with a handwritten signature from Walt Disney himself, to show authenticity.

The company leverages marketing campaigns that appeal to our emotions, and connect with our inner child. Disney also constantly innovates, creating new stories and experiences based on what it learns about its customers and their values.



Brand image vs brand identity: What is brand image?

So if your brand identity is a mishmash of all the elements you use to shape customer perception, and differentiate your business, what is brand image? Brand image is how customers actually see your brand, and how they feel about it.

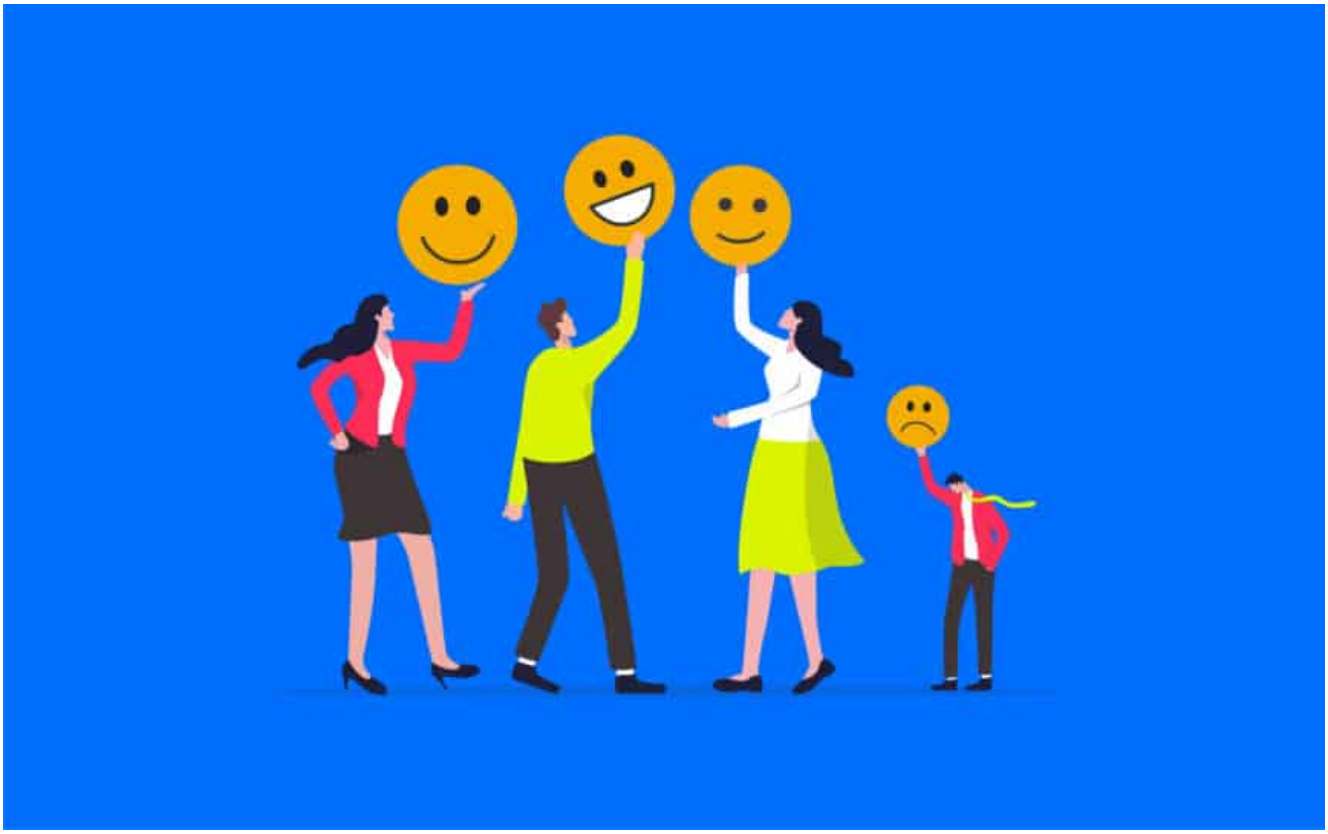
Companies have complete control over the elements of their brand identities. You get to choose which brand colors you use, and the tone of voice in your marketing strategy. However, you can't control how people actually respond to those assets.

The overall perception your target market has of your company is shaped by a number of things, from your marketing strategies, to how well you live up to your brand promise.

Over time, your brand image can shift and change, influencing customers in different ways. People will form their opinions

based on their observations and interactions with you.

This means even if you have an exceptionally well-crafted brand identity, other external factors, like negative PR and bad publicity, customer reviews, and even customer service experiences could lead to a poor brand image.



Why is brand image so important?

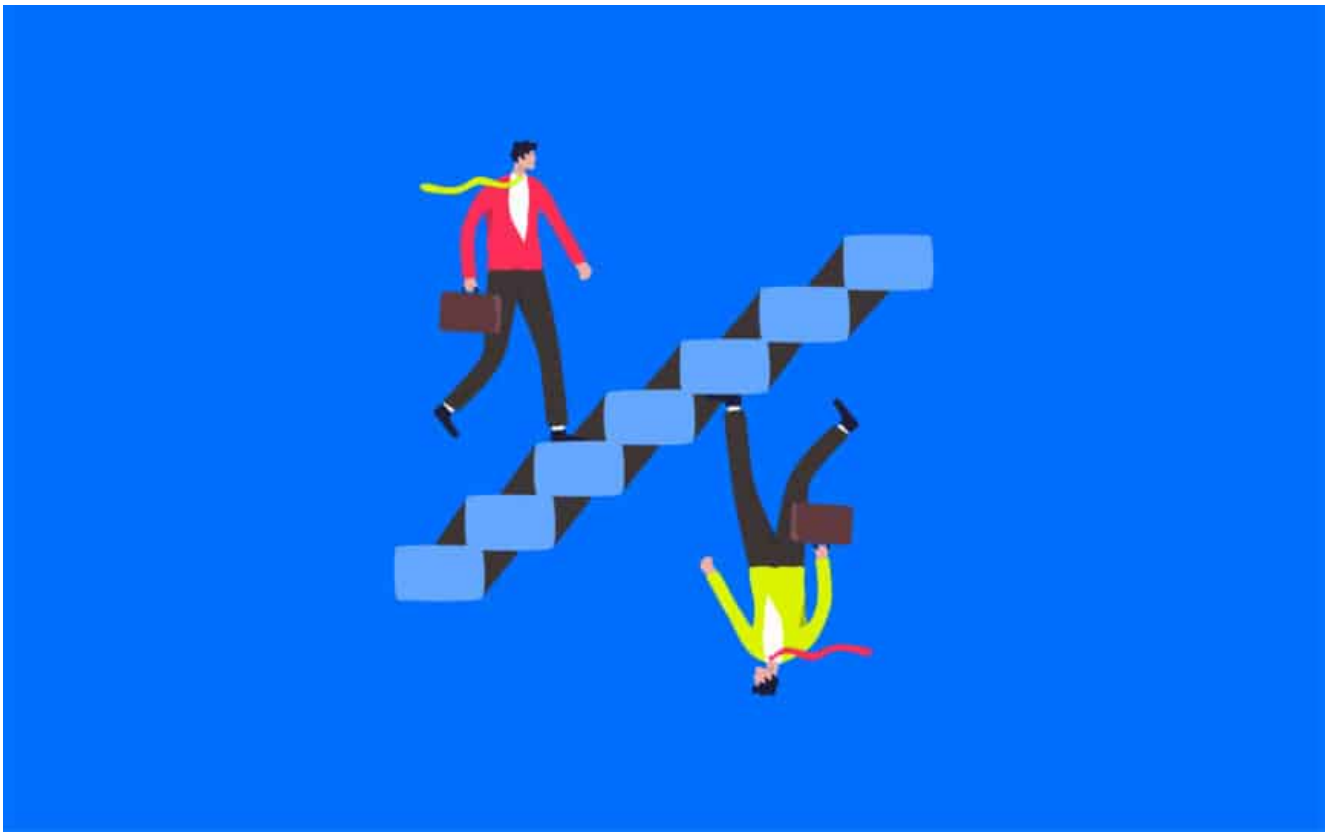
You can tell the world any story you like with the assets of your brand identity, but what really matters most is what your customers actually believe. It’s the perspectives of your target audience that determine whether you’ll earn loyal customers and make a profit.

A favorable brand image essentially determines whether your company will be successful. The better your image, the more likely you are to build deeper relationships with your customers, turning fans into advocates and long-term supporters of your brand.

A strong brand image can even give you some protection in a competitive market. When other companies emerge in your industry with cheaper products or new features to offer, the trust you've developed with your brand image will help you retain brand loyalty.

In some cases, companies with a positive brand image can even more effectively survive scandals and negative press. The Coca-Cola brand has released plenty of products that turned out to be massive failures over the years, but they haven't lost their target audience.

That's because, when customers already associate your brand name and logo with positive experiences, they're more likely to forgive your misdemeanors.



Brand image vs brand identity: The relationship

So, what's the difference between brand image and brand

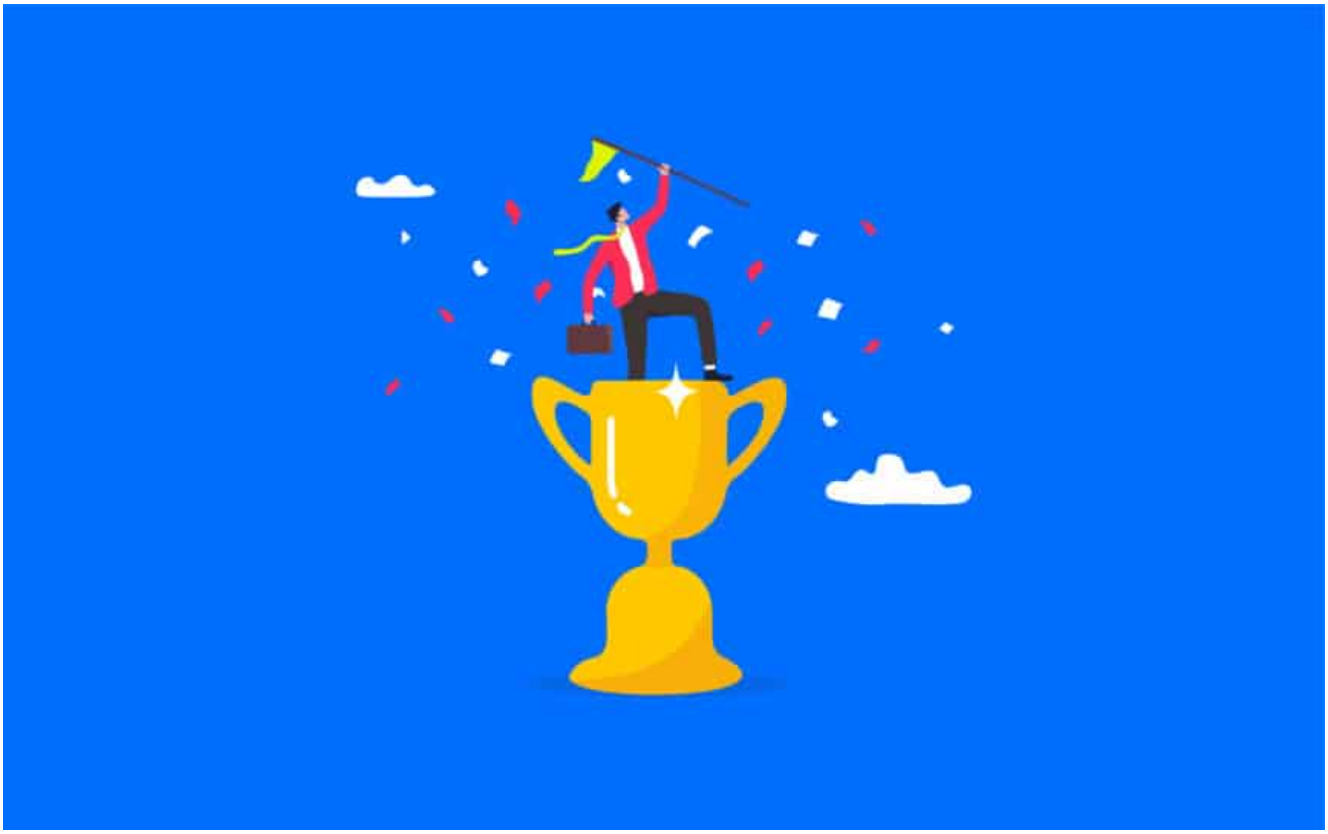
identity? The answer is perspective. Brand identity is something you control. It’s how you choose to portray yourself, your products, and brand’s personality to your customers, based on what you know about your niche market.

Brand image is how your customers actually perceive your brand. Clearly, this means that brand identity, and brand image are closely aligned. Taking control of your brand identity is one of the only ways you can attempt to shape your brand image.

If you want customers to perceive you as a trustworthy and reliable company, you need to demonstrate transparency in your marketing messages, focus on delivering positive experiences, and create a consistent image across every channel.

If you want companies to see you as an innovator, you need to align your team around a vision for constant growth and development, be open to experimentation, and share your discoveries with your customers as often as possible.

Unfortunately, while your brand identity and brand guidelines can contribute to your brand image, they’re only one piece of the puzzle. A brand image is something that forms over time, and is constantly influenced by different factors.



How to improve your company’s brand image

Defining your brand identity is simple enough, particularly if you have the help of an expert, like a branding consultant. Shaping and improving your brand image is much tougher. Some aspects of your brand image will be influenced by factors outside of your control.

However, there are things you can do to align your brand identity and brand image, and boost your chances of success.

Here are our top tips for success.

Step 1: Get to know your market and audience

We’ve said it before, and we’ll say it again: your customers’ opinions make the biggest impact on your company’s chances of success. A strong brand image relies on your ability to

understand the needs, goals, and pain points of your target audience, and adapt your business accordingly.

If you don't know what matters to your customers, how can encourage them to see you in the best light? If you're building a business from scratch and don't have any customers yet, look at your competitors. Find out how they position themselves in front of a similar audience.

What kind of values do they show, what do their customers comment on most when leaving feedback and reviews? This will help you to define the core components of a positive brand image for the specific audience you want to reach.

Step 2: Create the components of your brand identity

As mentioned above, brand identity and brand image might not be the same thing – but they are connected. Once you've collected as much information about your market, audience, and competitors as possible, you need to start building your identity.

Think about how your customers need to perceive you. Are they looking for a company with a commitment to excellent customer service, or a brand with a fun and playful personality?

How can you shape those perceptions by sharing insights into your brand values, mission, and vision in your marketing materials, logo, and other assets? A good strategy is to step into your customer's minds. Imagine you were a person in your market encountering your business for the first time.

How would you describe your company? What would you like and dislike about it, and what could change your perspective?

Step 3: Design essential guidelines

Once you have the core elements of your brand identity in place, you need to create documents that will get all of your employees, stakeholders, and contractors on the same page. Detailed brand guidelines are the key to ensuring consistency in your branding.

A lack of consistency gives your customers a variety of different, conflicting messages about your business and what it stands for. This means they stop trusting what you say about yourself, and may begin forming more negative opinions, based on external factors.

The guidelines you create should cover everything from which colors you should use in your marketing campaigns, to what your logo should look like, and the language you adopt in marketing.

Step 4: Be authentic and transparent

If you want your brand image to resonate with your brand identity, then you need to give your customers a reason to believe in whatever you tell them about your company. Any organization can tell their customers that they're committed to delivering a "reliable service".

However, if you constantly let your customers down when they need you, never respond to negative reviews, and make no efforts to improve, your brand equity will diminish.

Creating an authentic and transparent brand simply means being as honest as you can be with your target audience. Don't make promises you can't keep, and be open when you make mistakes.

Simple things like responding to negative feedback, sharing insights into your brand supply chain and product development strategies, and apologizing when you make mistake can go a long way.

Step 5: Put your customers first

Customers will always have a better opinion of a brand that puts their needs and concerns first. In fact, studies show that 65% of consumers think a positive customer experience is more influential than excellent advertising.

With that in mind, think about how you can delight your customers every time you interact with them. How can you ensure they always get a high quality product or service? What can you do to streamline the purchasing journey, or make it easier for customers to get help with issues.

In a crowded market, the commitment you have to serving your customers will help to ensure they develop a positive, strong image of your business and brand.

Step 6: Watch your brand associations

Have you ever noticed how the friends and contacts of the people we know can shape what we think about them. It's the same for brands. Partnering and working with other companies can be an excellent way to improve brand awareness and reach.

But it's important to be cautious about who you align yourself with. If you want your customers to see you as a sustainable and eco-friendly brand, then you can't also work with companies that are known for high carbon emissions and wasteful practices.

Whenever you're partnering with another company, an influencer, or thought leader to elevate your brand's voice, think about how their image will influence your brand's reputation.

Step 7: Monitor sentiment and perceptions

Probably the best way to make sure you're building a positive brand image, is to pay close attention to the way people talk

about you. Requesting customer feedback, and paying attention to what customers dislike, or like about your company will help you to make positive changes.

Using social monitoring tools, you can even find out what people are saying about your business on social media platforms and forums. This can give you an excellent insight into your customer's minds, and whether their perception of you is changing for the better, or worse.

Plus, constantly monitoring your customers and their feedback means you can more rapidly respond to any issues your customers have. Your approach to dealing with the negative experiences of your customers can make a huge difference to how they think about your company.

Step 8: Stay agile

People and their priorities change over time. When McDonalds first launched, it wanted to be seen as a company dedicated to providing every consumer with convenient fast food. However, as customer priorities evolved, and people became more concerned about their health, McDonalds had to adapt.

They changed various aspects of their identity, from their marketing messages to the product collection they offered to adhere to the changing expectations of their customers.

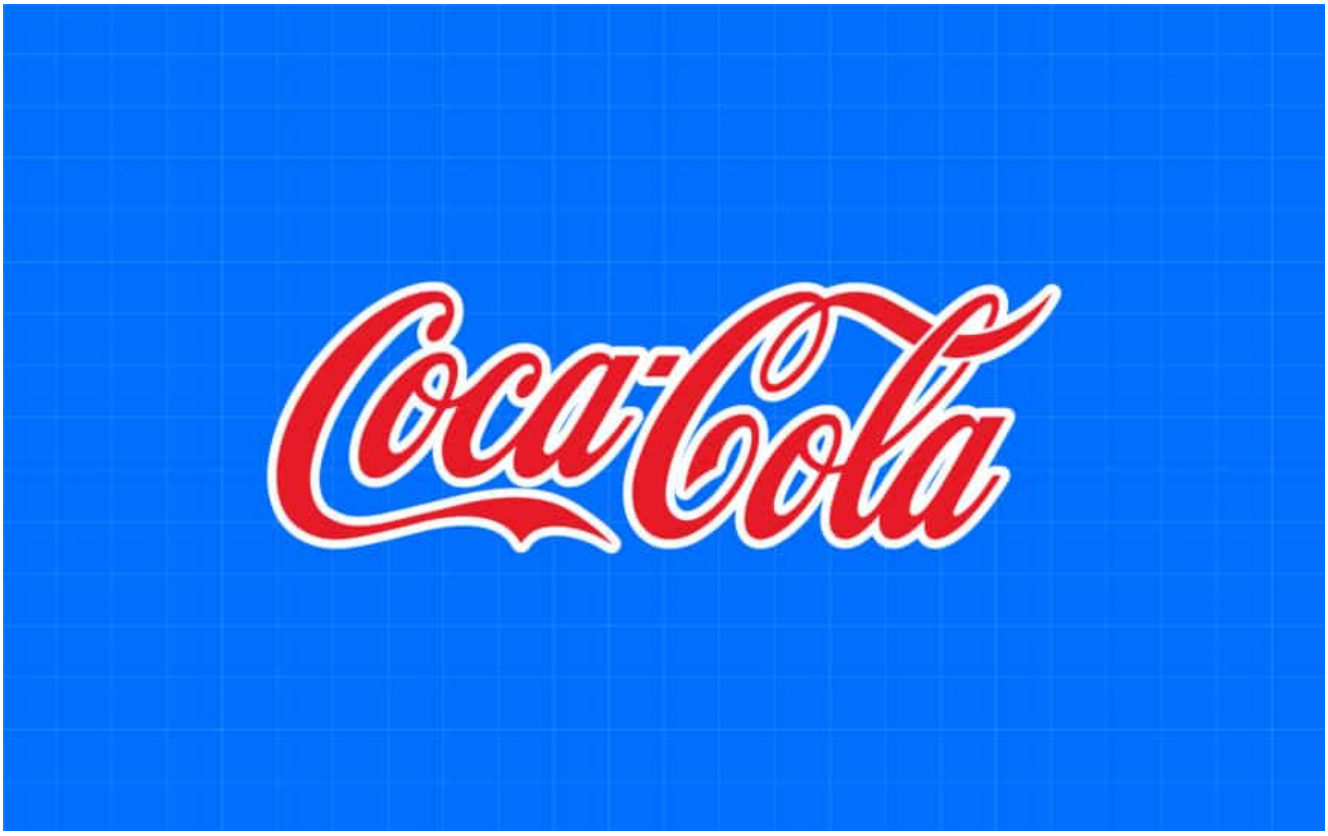
If you want to survive in today's competitive world, you need to take a similar approach. Keep a close eye on how the preferences of your customers change with constant market research, and insights into your competitors. Don't be afraid to evolve.

Examples of brand image and brand

identity

Still confused about brand image and brand identity?

Let’s take a closer look at the identity of some major brands, and how they align with the “image” customers have of them for inspiration.



1. Coca-Cola

Starting with one of the world’s biggest brands, Coca-Cola positions itself as the “original innovator” in the soft drink world. The company’s mission is to both refresh the world, and make a difference.

Its image revolves around fun and vitality, with its red and white color palette, and advertising campaigns featuring real people. So, how does this identity as a playful, innovative, and ethical company translate to Coca-Cola’s brand image?

The simple answer is pretty well. Around 70% of soft drink

consumers say they like Coca-Cola, and many see the company as a leader in the soft drink market.

Additionally, Coca-Cola's cutting-edge initiatives, like its marketing campaign featuring AI-generated art, have helped the company strengthen its relationships with its audience. It's seen as a company that listens to its customers, and addresses their needs.



2. Patagonia

Patagonia tells its customers that its not just an apparel manufacturer, it's a company committed to making the world a more sustainable place. The company is extremely transparent about its values and focus on environmental protection.

It also constantly implements initiatives that demonstrate its commitment to protecting the earth, like recycling programs, and activism campaigns. Patagonia's image aligns well with its brand identity.

People see the company as caring and ethical, and they even

buy products from the brand to help them highlight their own commitments to social responsibility.

Studies have shown that Patagonia customers overwhelmingly say they care about the environment, and actively take steps to reduce their carbon footprint.



3. United Airlines

We've seen two examples of companies with well-aligned brand identities and brand images. Now, let's look at an example of a company that's struggled to preserve a positive brand image in recent years. United Airlines positions itself as a friendly, caring company.

It uses taglines like "Fly the friendly skies" for branding, and has created marketing campaigns around messages like "Good leads the way".

But the actions of United Airlines sometimes tell a different story. The company has been at the heart of a number of scandals, involving dragging people off flights, and even

forcing a woman to place her dog in an overhead bin, causing its death.

This has led to a somewhat problematic brand image for United Airlines over the years, with customers questioning just how "friendly" the company really is.

What is the difference between brand image and brand identity?

So, what's the difference between brand image and brand identity? It's all about perspective. Your brand identity is something your business crafts to shape perceptions, and hopefully earn the loyalty of your target audience.

Your brand image is how every existing and potential customer you interact with responds to your brand message. While your brand identity can help to shape your brand image, you can never have total control over how people choose to see you.

The key to success in today's world is learning how to align your brand identity with your brand image as closely as possible. If you can earn your customer's trust and send the right message with your brand activities, products, and marketing materials, you can influence your brand image.

Just remember, building and preserving your brand reputation takes a lot of work. You'll need to commit to constantly convincing your audience that you are who you say you are.

If you need help getting started, reach out to Fabrik today to learn more about how you can build your company's identity, and boost your chances of a strong brand image.

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