Why brands lose their way [part 1]: The dangers of inconsistent branding

Category: Branding
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A brand is a constantly-evolving entity.

Your brand strategy should not only highlight your company's identity today, but how you plan to evolve in the future in the pursuit of your unique vision. Of course, just because your brand shouldn't remain static, doesn't mean that it should be constantly changing either. After all, the more your identity changes, the more confused your customers will become.

Today's customers like to think as brands as people, or groups that they can establish an emotional connection with. Inconsistent branding creates an uneven personality for your organisation, making it harder to establish the affinity that leads to long-term trust.

When a business delivers the same branding from one touchpoint to the next, that entity starts to feel like a "friend" that your customer trusts and understands. On the other hand, when your logo, colour scheme, voice, and typography differ across platforms, this undermines your credibility. Ultimately, your brand equity begins to disappear.

Remember, consistent brands are up to four times more likely to improve their visibility, both online and off.

It takes a careful strategy and a strong portfolio to ensure that you don't fall victim to the dangers of inconsistent branding. For the first part of our new series on how brands lose their way, we're going to help you unify every part of

your branding strategy and ensure corporate cohesion.



The dangers of inconsistent branding: Why consistency is key

Of all the dangers associated with inconsistent branding, the most obvious problem is confusion. If your customers aren't sure what you do and what you stand for, how can they decide if you're the right solution to their problems? After all, 64% of consumers say that shared values are their primary reason to develop a relationship with a brand. If your values keep changing, your customers will struggle to trust you.

The impression you make on your customers with your branding, marketing materials, and website ultimately influences the strength of your business. That's why even the smallest brand consistency mistake can lead to serious headaches.

When you don't have a design team guiding your decisions, it's easy for small brand inconsistencies to appear in everything

from your colour choices, to your tone of voice on social media. This happens because every person in your organisation that produces content for your company naturally has their own voice, style, and insights. Unfortunately, when this brand inconsistency begins to build up, your business suffers from multiple mismatched identities, and no true image.

For instance, Colgate's 1982 brand update is an old (but still relevant) inconsistent branding example that highlights the importance of staying true to your vision. In the 80s, Colgate released a line of branded entrees called "Colgate kitchen entrees".



Confused? You're not alone.

The company wanted to expand, and decided frozen food was the best way to do that. After all – eating is something else you do with your teeth, right? The problem was, Colgate already had a reputation as a well-known toothpaste brand. Despite their good intentions, their customers simply didn't like the idea of toothpaste-branded food.

The entrees themselves might have tasted incredible, but what mattered to the company's audience was the inconsistency in the branding. They felt the new product didn't fit with the image Colgate had already created.

Countless studies show that strong, consistent brand awareness is crucial to influencing buyer behaviour. The more a company stays true to their image and niche, the more of an authority they become in the eyes of their customers. If your brand image is constantly changing, your company looks as though it's having an identity crisis. If you don't know who you are, how can your customers get behind you?



The top mistakes that companies with inconsistent branding make

While it's easy to assume that inconsistent branding is something that only happens with start-ups and novice companies. That's not exactly true.

While it’s more common to make mistakes with your image when you’re just getting started, anyone can fall victim to the dangers of inconsistent branding. Something as simple as a change in your social media marketing plan that’s poorly implemented around your enterprise can be enough to change your personality entirely.

Let’s look at some of the biggest mistakes that companies with inconsistent branding make. Ask yourself if these issues sound familiar to you.

Inconsistent branding mistake 1: Losing sight of the brand vision

Brands naturally evolve with time. Changing customer preferences, new trends in the marketplace, and even mergers or acquisitions can have an impact on the way your business grows. However, staying up-to-date doesn’t have to mean losing your brand identity. Even if you’re refreshing your image, or implementing a new campaign, make sure that you don’t fall victim to inconsistent branding, by keeping one eye on your vision.



Your company vision, or your goal for an ideal future, can act as a guiding star for your branding decisions. It's what helps your customers to connect with you, and it brings humanity back to your business. There are few cautionary tales better than Gap's logo re-design problem when it comes to the importance of staying true to your vision. When Gap changed their logo, they wanted to create a new, modern image. Unfortunately, customers had grown attached to the simple and classic Gap square.

The lesson here? Make sure that you recognise what makes your company special, and keep those values front-of-mind when making branding decisions.



Inconsistent branding mistake 2: Relying on trends

Here at Fabrik, we love staying on top of the latest web design, branding, and marketing trends. However, just because we like to stay on top of the changes, doesn't mean that we advise our clients to transform their look every time something new emerges.

There's nothing wrong with keeping up to-to-date with the latest trends. In fact, it's a good way to make sure that your image doesn't become old and outdated. However, getting too caught up in what looks cool in the moment can cause you to lose track of the things that matter. A timeless image is always more powerful than one that embraces the current trends.

If you're thinking of rebranding, or you want to refresh your design, use the trends for inspiration, but don't follow them too closely. Stick to what makes your company unique.

Inconsistent branding mistake 3: Connecting with the wrong things

The Colgate case we outlined above is a great example of how companies can attach themselves to the wrong things. In the branding world, less can often be more. While it's tempting to spread your logo and name as far as the eye can see, you need a more refined approach if you want to avoid inconsistent branding.

Whenever you connect your company to something, make sure that it links back to your identity and brand promise. Starting a new marketing campaign? How does it demonstrate the identity your customers have grown to love? Introducing a new product? How does that item take you one step closer to your goals?



Disney saw some of the dangers of inconsistent branding for themselves in 2009, when they released Hannah Montana brand cherries into supermarkets in the US. Since cherries had nothing to do with the children's TV show, customers saw the move as nothing more than a cheap way to try and make more

money. The last thing you want is for your brand to look like a money-hungry corporation. Make sure that everything you brand delivers consistent value.

Inconsistent branding mistake 4: Not understanding your audience

One of the simplest ways to open yourself up to inconsistent branding disasters? Start building your company without user personas. Organisations that don't fully understand their niche, market, or audience often try to connect with as many different people as possible – as quickly as they can. This leads to a brand that tries to appeal to everyone and ends up connecting with no-one.

The only way to develop a powerful and consistent voice for your company, is to know who you're talking to. The more you drill down into who your customers are, what their likes and dislikes are, and what they want from you, the more you can develop an in-depth personality for your brand. This personality gives you an image that you can convey in all your marketing and branding materials. What's more, it also helps your advocates to understand how they can best share your message.



Inconsistent branding examples: The Coca-Cola case study

Want an example of how dangerous inconsistent branding can be?

Look no further than everyone's favourite fizzy beverage brand.

Coca-Cola is one of the biggest companies in the world, and it has one of the most recognisable brand images too. If you tried, you could probably picture the Coke logo in your mind accurately – even if you haven't seen it in a while. That's because it's stayed more or less the same since 1887. In fact, you might even be able to pick the right shade of red out of a line-up.

When it comes to inconsistent branding examples, Coca-Cola is a great lesson in why it's so important to stay true to yourself. For the most part, the company is a champion of consistency, with their memorable script font, and their focus

on storytelling in advertising campaigns. Yet, at one point during their brand story, Cola-Cola almost sabotaged everything they had with one simple inconsistency.

Back in 1975, Pepsi launched the “Pepsi Challenge” to find out whether blind taste-testers preferred the flavour of Pepsi or Coke. Innocent enough right? Over the years, customers started to realise that they did prefer the taste of Pepsi, and the Coca-Cola team knew they needed to do something to ramp up their brand identity again. Their creation was “New Coke” – a substance that’s now in the branding mistake hall of fame.

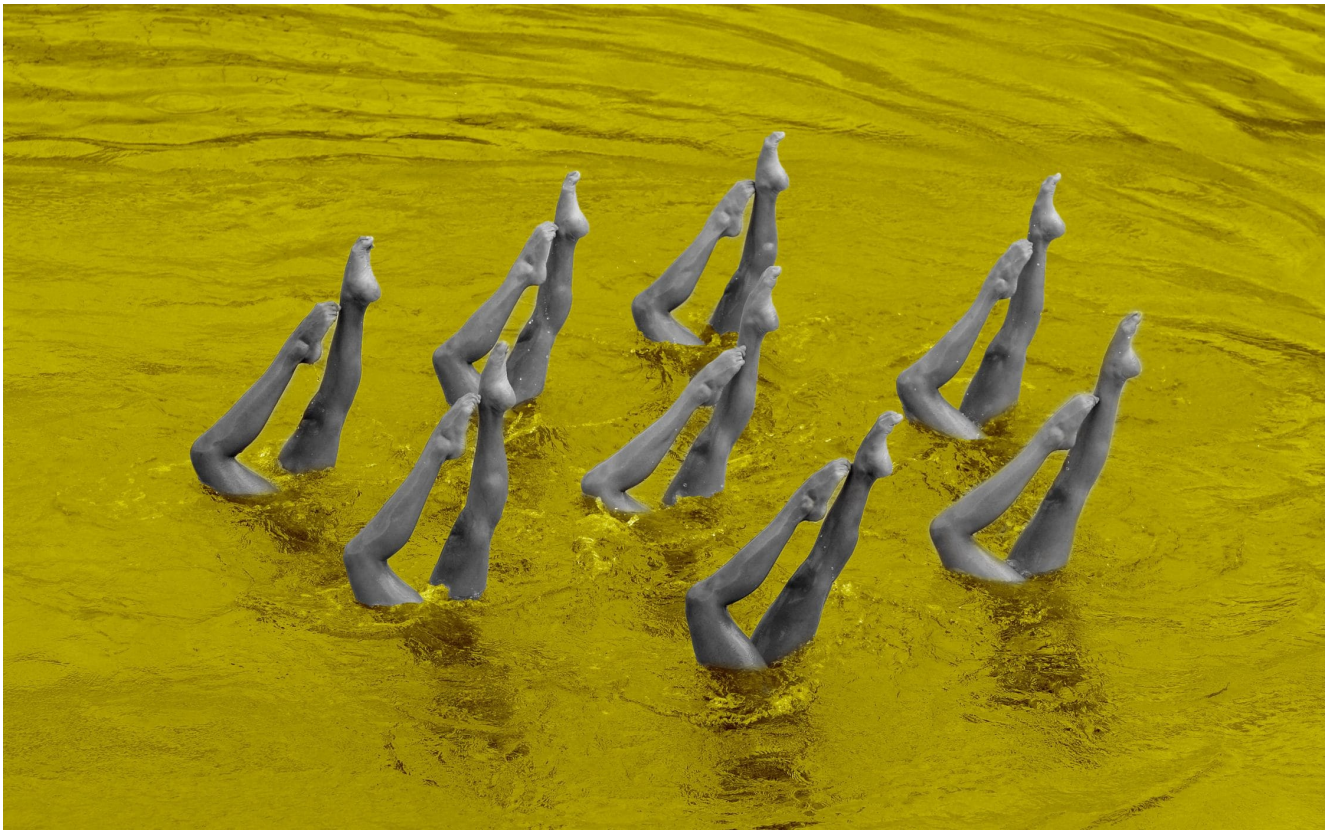


After testing the market to see whether people preferred the flavour of “New Coke”, the company shut down production of their original drink and announced that the far more delicious drink would take its place. Yet, rather than receiving a new stream of happy customers, the company got the opposite to what they expected: outrage.

People were devastated that they couldn’t get the drink they had grown so familiar with. It didn’t matter to them that “New Coke” was an objectively better beverage than the previous

formula. People just wanted the original, consistent Coca-Cola back. In simple terms, Coke discovered that the quality of a product can often take a back seat to the power of brand consistency.

When a customer feels familiar with a brand, they start to trust that company. Any inconsistent branding – even a new strategy designed to appease those customers, can be enough to destroy your company. Coca-Cola has never strayed from its heritage as “The Real Thing” since.



Battling brand inconsistency: How to maintain your focus

Now you know how disastrous brand inconsistency can be, how do you make sure that you maintain the right image for your company?

It all starts with analysing your current strategy.

Brand consistency begins with coordinating your assets across

every space where your company has a footprint. That includes your website, your offline locations, your social media accounts and more. Aligning your identity in every area:

- Helps to differentiate your business with a unique personality.
- Gives your company a personality that people can relate to.
- Reinforces your key messaging and tone of voice.
- Drives customer loyalty and referrals.

Of course, avoiding inconsistency means more than slapping your logo on everything you own and calling it a day. You're going to need a style guide, and a strategy. Here are a few tips to get you started:

1. Coordinate your brand image

The human brain recognises images faster than words. That means that you need a consistent visual identity if you want to build familiarity with your audience. Throughout all your media (including your website, social media sites, and business directories), make sure that your customers see the same images, graphics, and styles.

Check your logo, your font, and even your colours. The right colour can increase brand recognition by as much as 80%! Once you know exactly what you want your company to look like, write down the details in your style guide and share it with the rest of your enterprise.

2. Clarify what you do and who you do it for

As your business begins to grow, the chances of inconsistent branding will grow with it. It's easy to get pulled away from your initial brand identity when you're trying to develop a stronger, more profitable company. A good way to make sure

that you don’t lose track of where you come from, is to get clear about your mission and vision.

Figure out who you are, what your company does, and why you’ve made the decisions that have led you this far. Think about how you want your customers to see you, and why you want to be viewed in that way. For instance, do you want to be a brand that’s all about customer service and fun? Would you prefer an identity that sets you apart as an industry thought leader? Decide what kind of person your brand would be and bring that character to life.

3. Build up your brand guidelines

Creating a brand manifesto can seem complicated at first – but it’s actually much simpler than you’d think. If you have more than one person dealing with the branding and marketing of your business, the best way to avoid inconsistent branding is with a style guide. Plenty of larger companies take this approach to getting the right reputation for their company. Just look at Spotify, for instance. Your guidelines should include the following:

- The thinking behind your company name.
- Your values / mission statement.
- Your strapline and descriptors.
- The rudiments of your logo design.
- Typefaces, fonts and layout styles.
- Primary and secondary colour palettes.
- Imagery and brand photography.
- Tone of voice and copy styles.

4. Master your messaging

Once you’ve got your brand image sussed, it’s time to break down your voice. This refers to how you speak to your customers, stakeholders, and other people in your community. Your tone is an important part of your personality, and it’s

important to make sure that it stays the same across all channels. If you have separate people doing your copywriting and social media posts, make sure that they know the key points that should remain the same when they're writing.

To eliminate inconsistent branding, choose a handful of adjectives that describe the kind of tone you want to reach. About three or four should be enough. Too many and it will be hard to get the right vibe for your brand. Just like your brand visuals, the tone you use can make or break your ability to earn trust from your tribe.

5. Plan ahead

Finally, it's tough to stay consistent when you don't know what's coming next. Parts of your organisation will naturally begin to change as your company grows. Brands lose their way when they forget to prepare for those changes. Whenever something new happens in your company, be ready to send out a newsletter or piece of content that lets your marketing team know how your voice or brand should be affected.

At the same time, when it comes to consistency, remember how important it is to maintain a regular cycle of engagement with your audience too. Planning ahead can also mean that you create a content calendar that reminds you of how often you should be posting blogs, shooting new videos, and creating podcasts. This consistency will show your audience that you haven't forgotten that they're the ones who matter.

When you're consistent with your content, you also give your customers a reason to keep coming back to your website and checking for new updates. If your website goes for months without an update, your audience will not only lose interest in you and your purchase cycle, but they could also begin to feel cynical about your brand. While an active website shows a successful, focused company, a blog covered in metaphorical tumbleweeds often indicates the opposite.



Don’t be a victim of inconsistent brand messaging

Inconsistent branding is a common and complicated issue for many companies.

The more your business evolves, and the more the marketing world around us continues to change, the harder it is to maintain a strong, focused image. Brand consistency doesn’t have to mean that all the communications and media you produce look identical. However, there should be standards in place that guide your employee advocates, marketing team, and branding experts to capture what makes you unique.

While consistent branding reinforces your identity, drives positive sentiment, and encourages trust, inconsistent branding:

- **Erodes trust:** Most of the connections between companies and their customers come from a set of shared values. If

you're fickle with your voice and image, or you don't stay true to your brand promise, then your customers won't know whether they can trust you to deliver the experience they're looking for.

- **Damages reputation:** An inconsistent marketing plan or an identity with personality issues makes it appear that a company doesn't put enough effort into its campaigns. If you can't invest in your brand, or you're not committed enough to make your company look good, then your customers will wonder why they should buy from you in the first place.
- **Causes confusion:** Your customers are out there looking for more than just a great product or a good price. Today's consumers want a lot more from their favourite brands. They want an experience they can trust, and a set of values they relate to. If your customers can't decipher what you're all about, they'll turn to a company they can resonate with more easily.

A great brand can't exist without consistency. A strong collection of values, design patterns, and marketing messages is how you give your business a concrete identity. It's how you go from being just another company, to the entity your audience has been looking for. If you're struggling with inconsistent branding, now might be the time to reach out for some help. Contact Fabrik, and overcome your identity crisis.

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