

And the brand played on.

The simple truth about professional services
branding

Just a little misunderstanding.

I like reading. I like learning. So I read a lot in the hope I'll learn a lot.

But sometimes the opposite happens. The more you read, the more you realise how much you still have to learn. Worse, what you thought you knew becomes muddled by ever more theories & definitions.

And that's particularly the case with brand.

"The brand is the experience & the experience is the brand." "A brand is something that resides in the minds of consumers." "Brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room." "Your brand is a promise." "A brand is a singular idea or concept that you own inside the mind of a prospect." "The brand is what the brand does."

All definitions of brand I agree with to a lesser or greater extent.

However, there's a common problem with many definitions. They don't always offer much guidance about how to build, manage & strengthen the thing - particularly in the icky world of professional services.

So what to do?

Hard to explain.

A quick bit of history. Brand is originally a Norse word - Brandr - meaning to burn.

It originates from the time when tribes would burn a mark on their livestock to identify them (farmers still talk about branding cattle). In time, different marks came to identify varying degrees of quality.

In the world of product branding, things are relatively simple (from one angle at least). Unilever, P&G, Kraft Heinz, Coca-Cola & so on refer to each product in their portfolio as a brand.

It's with corporate branding that things become complicated. In the world of professional services the problem's compounded because it's difficult to define exactly what you sell. It's no wonder we've ended up with the multitude of definitions & explanations like those above.

However, things don't have to be confusing.

At their root, all definitions of brand are really about just one thing. Positioning. Creating the right associations in the minds of the people you want to buy your services.

That makes things much easier.

I'll make it clear.

Using that premise, Thirteen's definition of brand is straightforward:

"The sum of anything & everything that creates a perception about who & what you are."

It's also practical & tells you what you need to focus your efforts on - the perception you want people to have of you & how that's created. Which is about understanding what makes you distinctive & how to communicate it.

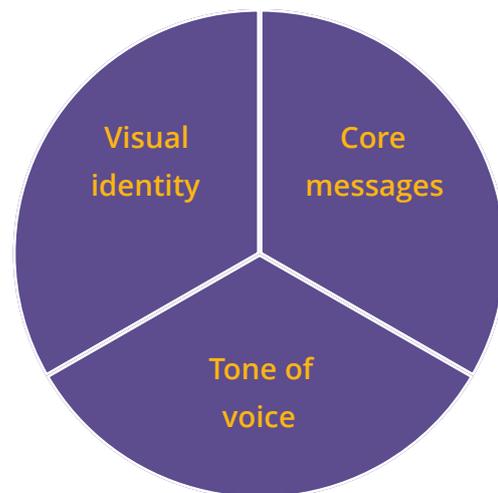
Now, I'd never recommend any firm actually presents their final brand as a pie chart or fancy Venn diagram.

But for anyone thinking about their firm's brand or starting a brand project, the visual below's perfect. It simplifies everything into manageable chunks & gives you an easy process to work through:

What makes you distinctive



How you communicate it



On the next page you'll find 13 tips & pointers to help with each segment.

I'm not suggesting for a second that this is all there is to branding. A lot more follows (obviously). However, getting these first steps right will give you the foundations of a really strong brand.

And when you've done that? Well, then the hard work really begins...

- 1 You can't separate brand & strategy. They're both about the sort of firm you are & want to be, who you want to work for, the work you want to do & how you're going to win it.
- 2 Don't even think about visual identity until you've nailed your brand essence & positioning. You can't communicate what makes you distinctive until you've uncovered what makes you distinctive.
- 3 Under no circumstances use any of these words anywhere: expertise, friendly, integrity, leading, pre-eminent, premier, professional, quality, strategic, unrivalled. They're boring & everyone uses them.
- 4 Everything you say needs to pass the RAD test - it needs to be relevant, authentic & distinctive.
- 5 Your brand essence is, well, the essence of what makes you distinctive. Your DNA. You should be able to express it in one or two words. If you can't, people won't remember it.
- 6 Your positioning statement is the big, bold declaration of what you want the world to think when they hear your name. It's your "The Ultimate Driving Machine" moment. Make the most of it.
- 7 Your business purpose isn't about who you are or what you do. It's about what you do for your clients & what they can do because of that. This is what your clients & prospects are interested in.
- 8 Can you pinpoint real life examples of doing specific things for your clients & people that demonstrate your values? If you can't, you don't have those values. Also, see point two.
- 9 You don't need more than four messages to support your brand. The more messages you have the less they'll be remembered. Messages can be personalised to different markets if necessary.
- 10 Make sure your tone of voice includes guidance for headlines & titles that grab the attention. They're a really powerful way to stand out.
- 11 Include a signal in your visual identity so people know something's yours without needing to see your name or logo (think the Burberry check).
- 12 Use the fewest, boldest words you can throughout. The whole point is to stand out.
- 13 Don't ask "do I like it?" Ask "does it work?". It doesn't matter how much you like something if it doesn't work - to know if something works you need a really tight brief, so have one of those as well.

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.