

This article was first published in the **Greater Kansas City Small Business Monthly**

Reprinted by permission of DBH Communications

'Graphic' First Impressions

The Importance of Corporate Identity

by Gary E. Lofstrom

In consulting with small businesses, I am often asked to help create marketing support materials using a company's current corporate graphic identity. All too often the existing corporate graphics that were once modern and attractive, have become stale through the passing of time. In some cases, the business just didn't comprehend the importance of having a distinctive corporate identity at the company's inception. Consequently, letterheads, envelopes, business cards, brochures, product packaging and other placements of the company's corporate identity are not making a good impression on prospects, customers, employees and other stakeholders. This article will discuss some of the key issues for entrepreneurs to consider, whether they are planning a new business or would like to modernize their present corporate identity.

What's in a Name?

Every business has a trade name. It's the name that serves to identify the business in conducting its day-to-day affairs, such as selling products and services, securing credit, purchasing goods for the business and paying taxes. For most small businesses, the trade name is also the chief way of communicating the nature of the business. Often the name of the owner (LOFSTROM & COMPANY) or words that describe the company's products (BAGEL & BAGEL) are chosen. Larger companies may go to the expense of having a consultant create a unique name for the business (LEXUS AUTOMOBILES).



From a marketing point of view, a company's name should have most if not all of these qualities:

- Brief yet distinctive
- Suitable to the business
- Easily spelled
- Pronounceable
- Lends itself to a graphic treatment

If your company has a name that doesn't necessarily meet all the above criteria, don't fret. Perhaps your company has earned a reputation for providing a good product or service and consequently the name has become a positive tool in your marketing efforts. You may want to consider a graphic update though, as discussed later in this article.

Before > **STRAUB**
Construction Co. Inc.

After > **Straub**
CONSTRUCTION

Shown is a corporate identity "makeover" for Straub Construction Company. Courtesy of Kelly Palmer Design.

Fashioning a Graphic Identity

The simplest and most effective way to create a corporate identity is for a graphic designer to fashion a design based on your company's name. Referred to as a graphic treatment, the designer will use a variety of fonts, lines, boxes, colors and other graphic elements to give your company's name communication power. The treatment will be applied to corporate stationery, packaging, signs and other promotional tools as desired.

Sometimes a separate logo can effectively support and accompany a trade name. Witness the memorability of Michelin's "radial man," Chrysler's Penistar logo and Apple Computer's stylized apple. Small businesses be forewarned though, cleverly designed logos can be a great

Continued >

identity tool, but are considerably more complicated (both in terms of time and money) than a simple graphic treatment. Clive Chajet, image consultant to many Fortune 500 corporations says, "Self-reading logos work better than any other, and are the ultimate goal of symbol designers."

Rosemary Holderby, owner of Cole Design & Production of Kansas City, says this about corporate identity, "The name and graphic design of a company is a very personal issue. It's often the first image a person has of that business. By talking to a client about their products, services and customers, I can identify a range of design possibilities. After producing several alternative approaches, the client can then react to various graphic treatments of their corporate identity. Selected approaches are then further refined to develop the best identity solution. I think small businesses are wise to include a description of their business's product in their company's name, or as a visually attached tag line. It helps them gain recognition with prospective customers. New businesses don't have the recognition like an IBM or General Motors."

Updating an Identity

One of the most difficult challenges is updating an old, yet venerable corporate identity. The company must decide if the identity is totally outmoded and needs to be abolished, or if a graphic freshening will instill a modern character to the business.

Mike Gregg, owner of Gregg & Associates of Kansas City remarks, "Over time graphic designs can lose their ability to communicate, but the owner's personal stake in the corporate identity often makes them hesitant to change. It's important to retain the goodwill of the past yet modernizing in order to successfully reach new, prospective customers. A good solution often retains the best of the old and adds fresh design elements to let customers know the company has contemporary products worthy of their consideration." Gregg notes how the John Deere Company has changed its logo numerous times over the last several decades through subtle, yet effective "facelifts."

A name change is a drastic (and expensive) transformation and is warranted only under certain circumstances. Reasons to change might include a name that is too wordy, a name that

"A good solution often retains the best of the old and adds fresh design elements to let customers know the company has contemporary products worthy of their consideration."

no longer describes the company's offerings, or when businesses merge and want to forge a new identity. "A name conversion is usually a last resort solution.

Companies sometimes find there are more problems than goodwill associated with an existing name, or that a new name is better suited for its new marketing initiatives," adds Gregg.

Legal Concerns

No discussion of corporate identity would be complete without noting important legal ramifications. The name you use for your business is a valuable asset you should protect dearly. Trademark law (also known as service mark law) is the group of federal and state statutes used to govern and protect a business's name and its distinctive graphics. The laws are intended to prevent other organizations from usurping the goodwill you've generated over time and to prevent customers from being misled by the use of similar names. Either on your own volition, or through the counsel of an expert trademark attorney, you should discover if your chosen name is eligible for protection under trademark laws. Consider getting referrals from friends and associates for attorneys specializing in intellectual property law.

Conclusion

Just as you have only once chance to make a first impression on those people you meet, so does your corporate identity have only one chance to make a first impression on behalf of your business. Be sure your name and graphic identity are positive communication factors for your company. ■

Lofstrom & Company

offers contemporary

marketing communi-

cations services

to a variety of

entities, including

financial service,

professional service

and

small business

organizations.

Services include

writing-editing,

project management,

strategic planning

and market research.