

Ask for a Process, Not for a Product

Why your beautiful brand identity will disappoint you — and why brand identity isn't a logo, it's a point of view that enables conversation.

Things are easy to understand. A product is a thing, and everybody understands things. A car is a thing, and a Vitamix is a thing, and even cloud document storage is a thing. Admittedly it's a weird thing — a server somewhere, in a cloud — but it's a thing.

You, a business, are in the business of making and selling these things. You push X units of a thing or Y volume of a thing or Z licenses for a thing. These amounts are quantifiable and reportable. These things fit easily into spreadsheets. At the bottom of the spreadsheet is profit, which, after all, is a very specific number for a very specific thing.

The Logo Trap

And so it also seems to make sense when you create a beautiful logo, brightly colored, unimpeachably sleek, to represent yourself or your latest thing. This thing, finally, will present a unified identity to your customers.

Of course the logo has usage rules, and guidelines, and its own marketing police force. And you're so proud of this thing that it sits there, as if under glass, in a terrarium, immobile, untouchable, under guard, to be regarded. Look at our logo, you say. Look at the anthemic video we made for sales. Look at the brand book with its glossy cover. What things. Much cool.

They're Cool, But You Can't Use Them

Most brands keep their newly minted identities like butterflies under glass: so pretty, so precious, so very very lifeless. Why? Because you were so invested in creating a thing, you neglected to create a process. A brand style guide is not a process. It's a rule book. It tells you no. And more importantly, it's not an idea generator.

That's fundamentally weird, right? After all, here's your brand identity — the thing that's supposed to tell you who you are — and it doesn't have a point of view.

- A logo and brand style guide don't tell a bizdev guy how to write a partnership email.
- A logo and brand style guide don't tell a sales guy how to empathize with a potential customer.
- A logo and brand style guide don't tell a developer how to make better decisions about how a product does what it's intended to do.

Or, put another way: if your brand identity doesn't help everyone have a conversation with your customers, then what's the point?

Nothing Else in Your Company Works This Way

Brands make things, but it's the process of making the thing that makes the brand valuable. Ford isn't valuable because it makes the F-150 thing — it's valuable because of the process of profitably making and selling a rugged truck with ruggedly delightful cup holders.

Vitamix isn't valuable because it makes the Vitamix thing. It's valuable because of the process of profitably making and selling a blender that's so efficient you forget you actually hate the kale you're efficiently blending.

Amazon isn't valuable because, as its logo implies, it sells everything from A to Z. Amazon is valuable because it modularized its infrastructure to more efficiently allocate internal resources on an ad-hoc basis while also selling those resources to customers. Amazon focused on process and changed the world.

Brand Identity Isn't a Logo — It's a Point of View

A pretty face is just a pretty face. But looks, as my grandmother told me, fade. What sticks around is the conversation, and how much you enjoy that conversation.

Focus on the conversational power of your identity. Make tools that help everyone from the CEO to the intern able to better tell your story. Ask for a process, not for a thing.