

Owning a Piece of Mind

Follow these **10 key action steps** and become the 'brand' leader in your market

BY MATT SHOONER

▼ Being recognized for doing quality work is key to building your brand.



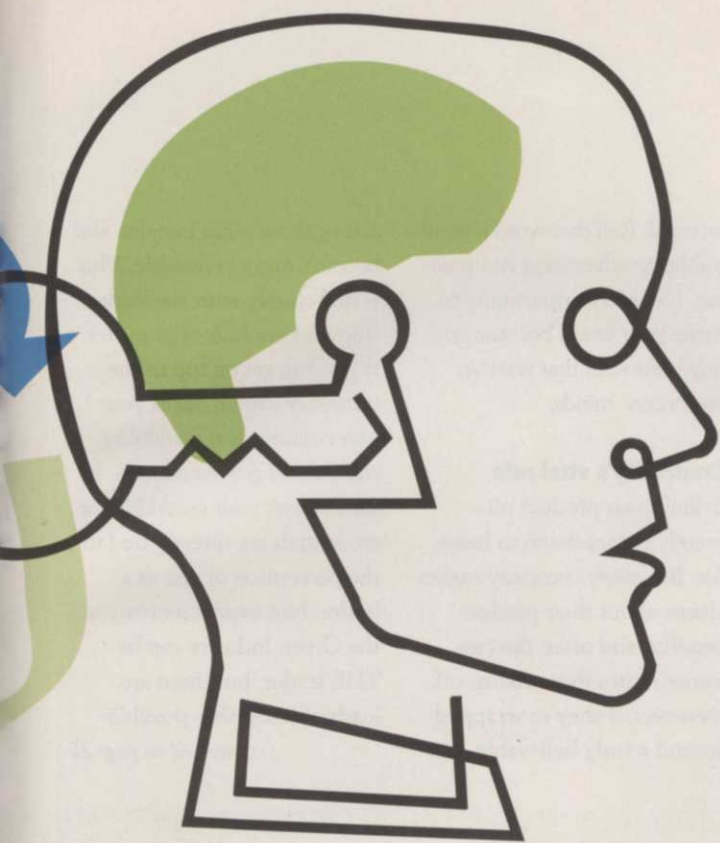
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our product is your brand. Whether you offer specific products or perform services, what you sell is your brand.

Brand building occurs in the mind of customers. The strength or weakness of your brand depends on the perception you're able to build of your product — your brand — in the customer's mind. A strong brand is easily recognized, more readily accepted and has a much better shot at success.

One good example of the power of a strong brand is Evian bottled water. We all know that just about everyone in North America can get good, clean water from a tap, but at one point recently, on a per-liter basis, Evian bottled water commanded prices 20% higher than Budweiser and 40% higher than Borden's milk.

Creating and maintaining a brand involves many elements. In fact, the power and success of your brand are ultimately the result of everything you do in the process of delivering your product. But for this article, we'll focus on the following critical areas:



- ▶ The power of publicity
- ▶ The role of advertising
- ▶ The value of "owning" a word
- ▶ The importance of credibility
- ▶ The role of quality in the equation
- ▶ How competition helps to build your brand

As the title of this article suggests, the more you stand apart from your competition in the consumer mind, the more powerful your brand becomes. This article will provide 10 specific keys to increasing your "mind share," your market share and your brand strength.

Publicity power

Publicity isn't advertising — it's news about you and your brand. When you make news, you get media coverage. Always remember that what others say about you is far more powerful than what you say

yourself. Strong brands are built more from publicity than advertising. Of course, the ideal way to make the news is to be the first in a whole new category, like:

- ▶ Band-Aid, the first adhesive bandage
- ▶ Heineken, the first imported beer
- ▶ Jell-O, the first gelatin dessert
- ▶ Xerox, the first plain-paper copier, or
- ▶ Chem-Lawn, the first national lawn care company.

We're not all in a position to create a new product category, but we can all make the news and generate an immense amount of publicity for our brands. The goal is to achieve brand leadership in your category and markets.

Key #1. On your own or with help from an outside source, de-

tail all of the interesting and unusual facts about your business. What makes you different? What sets you apart? What are you especially adept at or have expertise in? Make a list. It'll be part of the foundation of getting your brand into the news.

Key #2. Create a schedule for doing high-visibility, high-profile, pro-bono (free) work. Choose projects that will have wide community appeal, like renovating an inner city playground or providing annuals, planting and care for certain high-traffic medians in town. Time your activity for maximum exposure, like around Earth Day or Arbor Day. This is an investment, but one which will directly build your brand.

Key #3. Create case studies or feature stories about your most interesting projects. Get professional photographs and record all of the significant steps and players in the project.

Key #4. Contact the media: business editors, gardening editors, leisure editors, metro editors, and television and radio news departments. Remember that these people are actively looking for news to report. Alert them to your projects. Be sure to have high-quality photos to provide and give them a well-written fact sheet on all of the special things about your company (from Key #1 above). If you can't get them to come to you, send news releases and photos. Have the news release professionally prepared. The key is to do newsworthy things

and then make sure the media knows all about it. Brand-building publicity will follow.

Advertising's role

As you build your brand and become widely known through publicity, your story will eventually be told and will no longer be news. That's when advertising takes over.

Advertising serves two important functions: to protect your brand from competition and to drive direct sales inquiries. Advertising isn't cheap, but it's essential. By spending enough to protect your leadership role, you make it tough for your competition to break in.

Key #5. Assert your brand leadership in all of your advertising. Claim the leadership of your category and you'll attract more business. Why? Because consumers believe that the leader must be better, and they want to go with a winner. Your leadership claim can be based on many things: oldest company, largest company, most employees, most markets served, or most awards received. Nearly any company can claim that they're the leader. And remember, it's not so important to say what your leadership claim is based on, but simply to claim the role of the leader, over and over again.

"Own" a word

An average adult knows the meaning of around 50,000 words, and there are about 2.5 million registered trademarks.

What do your prospects think when they hear or see your name? We all come up with lists of attributes for our products like quality, price and service. But, because there are so many and they're so widely used by many companies, they become generic and meaningless.

What word does FedEx own? Overnight. How about Mercedes? Prestige. Volvo? Safety.

The point is to narrow your brand's essence to one thought or word that no one else al-

ready owns. This goes against the grain for many business owners because they feel the need to expand rather than narrow their focus to fuel growth. Historically, however, the companies that keep a narrow focus tend to expand their categories and markets rather than just achieve a greater share of a static market.

Key #6. Looking at the list you created in Key #1 and analyzing the essential core competency of your business, reduce your focus to one idea, concept

or word. Roll that word into all publicity, advertising and training. Use every opportunity to make your brand become synonymous with that word in customers' minds.

Credibility's vital role

Selling your product ultimately comes down to benefits. But every company makes claims about their product benefits, and often the customer writes these claims off. However, if they're wrapped around a truly believable

claim, those same benefits also become more believable. This is tied closely with the leadership idea we looked at earlier. If you can get on top in the customer's mind, all of your other claims gain credibility and lead to greater success. In some ways, your credibility or credentials are directly tied to the perception of you as a leader. Not every company in the Green Industry can be THE leader, but there are loads of leadership possibili-

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Building a brand is a big job

If anybody knows anything about branding in the Green Industry, you'd think it would be an 87-year-old firm that's been selected as "best" by the media in its market area.

However, Kyle Natorp, President of the Natorp Companies, Cincinnati, OH, admits that he still wrestles with the concept of "branding" — this in spite of his company's rich history, the honors it has won and its instantly recognizable name.

"We spent two months last winter trying to come up with a brand position," says Kyle, the fourth generation of the family to oversee the firm. "We hired a consultant and spent several months working on the company overall. We're just now focusing on what the Natorp brand means and what it is."

His firm's challenge is both aided and hindered by the

breadth of services it offers. It started out as a landscaping business by William A. Natorp, Kyle's great grandfather, but has grown into a family operation (Kyle's father, Ken, is CEO and his brother, Craig, is Vice President) with locations surrounding the city. Besides offering landscape design/installation, the company manages a wholesale nursery and three retail garden centers. About 10 years ago, it also started providing landscape maintenance, and two years ago bolstered that service with stronger management, better focus and a bigger push into commercial.

"Maintenance has a strong growth potential," says Natorp. "We don't want to do just the mowing but also the horticultural visits, the fertilization, the chemical applications and the snow removal."



Natorp Companies builds its brand with billboards and postcards.

Kyle isn't so concerned that the company name is known; it is. He's more concerned about how it's perceived.

"A brand position is the way you want to be looked at by your customers," he says. "It's not something that you're at right now. It's something that you keep striving for."

In the case of the Natorp Companies, Kyle says management came up with a positioning statement that reflected the company's wide footprint in its market — "We want to be the company that makes the customer a success in the garden or in the landscape."

As part of that, company management is attempting to increase its brand awareness



to what it feels is a growing group of consumers, the "do-it-with-me" crowd. These are people who want professional help with their landscapes, but — either because of cost or the enjoyment they get from doing it — want to do some of the landscaping themselves.

"When it comes to branding, logos, letterheads and uniforms are important," adds Kyle. "But what I think is more important is what our crews do on each and every job."

—Ron Hall

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ties. For instance:

- ▶ The leading commercial landscape contractor
- ▶ The leading residential landscape contractor
- ▶ The leading locally owned lawn care provider
- ▶ The leading multi-family or homeowner association maintenance contractor
- ▶ The leading outdoor lighting contractor
- ▶ The leading irrigation contractor

Key #7. Define your leadership niche and build your credentials around it. Use the power of your credibility to increase sales and strengthen your claims regarding product benefits.

Where quality fits in

I'm a big proponent of high quality. And I truly hate shabby products and poor service. But when it comes to building your brand, quality alone won't do it. What's needed is the perception of quality. In a ranking of 16 small

cars, the top-quality car was 12th in sales and the second-highest quality ranking came in 9th in sales. There may be objective ways to test the true relative value of two landscape or lawn care firms, but customers don't conduct these tests when making a decision. They go with their perceptions.

Three things create the perception of quality that leads to increased sales:

- ▶ Positioning your company as a specialist organization rather than a do-anything outfit
- ▶ The power and memorability of your name
- ▶ Higher prices

Contracting your vision and your company's scope may fly in the face of what's actually taking place in the Green Industry, but it does help create the perception of being a specialist. And specialists charge more, right?

You should build as much quality into your product or service as you can afford, but don't count on quality alone to build your brand.

Key #8. Narrowing your

focus and charging higher prices strengthens and builds your brand.

Why competition is good

Many business owners dream of having a huge, unfair advantage in their market. Or, better yet, being the only game in town. But for building your brand, competition's good.

When customers have choices, demand tends to increase. Competition keeps customers from becoming suspicious of price or quality. If there's nothing to check you against, the customer has no yardstick for measuring the value of what you're offering. On the flip side, when there are too many players, customers tend to get confused and demand may drop. But in the Green Industry, this doesn't tend to happen because of the way estimates and proposals are given. Customers may call three contractors for prices, which gives them a manageable selection from which to choose.

If you've used all of the keys

we've provided and built your brand into a high-quality name, you'll tend to come out ahead of the competition anyway.

Key #9. Welcome competition. It drives up demand. And maintain and build your leadership position by not just talking up your company and products but promoting the whole category's value, whether it's landscaping, lawn care or maintenance.

Key #10. Get help, at least in laying out your blueprint for brand building. You may want to bring someone with publicity and media experience on staff, or hire a freelancer or professional marketing firm to manage part or all of the process. **LJM**

— The author started Focal Point Communications in Cincinnati, OH, in 1987 and opened a LA office in 2001. The Focal Point staff specializes in the creation of company identity, print marketing and public relations programs for Green Industry companies. Contact him at 800/525-6999 or mshooner@growpro.com.

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