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From the October 2010 Issue

Have you ever Googled your name or your firm's name? If not, you should. This is exactly what each of your prospective customers will do. Soon, if not already, customers will look to Facebook or LinkedIn to gather more information about you. The Web is how we learn today. Increasingly, it is how we make purchase decisions, and it is where your brand begins.

Brand image is an important part of any purchase decision. The really hard thing about brand is that no matter how hard you tell your prospective customers what your brand stands for; ultimately it is up to them to decide. The corollary is that the more you tell them what your brand stands for, the more likely it is that they will agree with you.

When I think about my perception of a brand, it almost always starts with the underlying values the company is trying to convey. This is especially important when it comes to service and not product decisions. Essentially, it is the underlying character and values that I care most about when I am deciding on a new accountant, attorney, graphic artist, engineer, etc. Ultimately, this is what marketers call your "Voice" and "Promise."

As an entrepreneur, I think it is impossible to separate your "Voice" from the company values. Whether or not you have written down and communicated your firm's values, they exist. And if you don't write them down,

then how can you be sure your employees understand them? That leads me to the

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are too important for a company memo.

STEP 2: PRACTICE YOUR VALUES EVERYDAY WHEN YOU ARE HIRING, GROWING AND MANAGING YOUR TEAM.

Practicing your values is harder than it sounds. This is why they need “to reflect” who you are as a person and who you aspire to be. If you have done that well, then you will be comfortable managing them. As a manager, you have to take the time to share your thinking around the values. As an individual contributor, you have to take the time to make sure your decisions reflect the values.

STEP 3: COMMUNICATE YOUR VALUES THROUGH YOUR EVERYDAY ACTIONS TO YOUR CUSTOMERS.

Communication has to be proactive and with purpose in order for you to make sure your customers get it. But indirect communication can make or break you. Only through a common set of values can you ensure that your direct and indirect communications are consistent and say what you want.

One interesting exercise is to imagine what an archeologist would say about your business if you walked out the door today and they walked in 500 years from now. What pictures are on the wall? Is the office neat or messy? Is the furniture frugal or expensive? Is there a lot of security or none? Would the archeologist be able to tell what business you were in? What would they think you cared about? Much in the same way that the archeologist interprets the essence of a culture by examining hints of it, so do your customers as they walk in your office.

One of the many indirect cues you give your customers about your brand is

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to your clients? If you are still doing that, chances are the brand voice you are communicating is not that of a forward-thinking “buttoned up” accountant. On the other hand, if you provide tools that enable your clients to access the information they need to run their business from a mobile phone or respond quickly to their email with a digital copy of their tax return during a mortgage refinancing, you will wow them. And they will think you are “buttoned up.”

Your brand isn't what you say it is; it's what your customers think it is. And actions speak louder than words. No matter what, indirect communications and the way you manage your business will dominate your clients' impressions. A solid set of values that drive your people and your business will ensure that your brand promise is what you want it to be ... now, and when the archeologists come digging!

Marketing

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