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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 first step in building your brand.

## **Step 1: Write down and communicate your values with your employees.**

In my experience, it's best to write down an outline of the things I care about and then talk with the team to get their input. The most important thing is to be yourself when deciding your values. Your values will help communicate your brand and help

you and your employees run the business. Once you have the values written down,

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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 the set of tools you use to manage both your business and their business. All the time, accountants tell me they want their customers to think of them as buttoned up and on top of things. That's why it is most gratifying when customers tell us that they love our core features, but what they love most is that it makes their business look "buttoned up."

Imagine doing your clients' taxes with pencil on the forms mailed from the IRS in today's world. What would your clients think? What does writing checks out by hand for your clients with check stock in an unlocked drawer say 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

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you want it to be ... now, and when the archeologists come digging!

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