Are Branding Agencies Still Relevant?

Author : Paul Woods

Date : July 4, 2016

The old way of designing brands is in desperate need of a rethink, writes Edenspiekermann's Paul Woods.

A couple years ago, I was interviewing for a job as **digital design** director at a (well-known) **branding** agency. After the usual pleasantries, we landed on the details of what the role would entail. To my dismay, the agency's interpretation of **"digital"** was simply putting a new logo onto website mockups at the tail end of an extensive guidelines document. It was clear that digital was very much an afterthought in their branding process and that the position was not for me.

This lack of understanding about the role of **digital** was disappointing, but unfortunately it was not surprising. Most friends of mine working at **branding** agencies use the same top-down, siloed process. And let's be clear, I have a lot of respect for their talent and the great **design** work they do. But, I believe that the old way of doing things—developing the strategy, then designing the **brand** and then the application—is in desperate need of a rethink. At a time when brand experiences are often based upon touch, sound, and voice, how can a **branding** process that starts out from a purely visual perspective ever possibly succeed?

With that in mind, here are the three big topics that **branding** agencies need to address to stay relevant in a digital world:

1. DON'T TELL ME, SHOW ME

Increasingly a **brand** is defined by what a product actually delivers, not by how the marketers tell us how we should feel about it. Don't tell me, show me. Spotify gives me easy access to a world of music. Do I care what it looks like? Probably not, once it has a great user experience. In fact, it would probably work equally as well as a white label app. For the user, the brand is defined by what it does, not by its logo or color palette.

Branding was never just about a logo, picking fonts, or a fancy color palette.

It comes down to this: Which comes first, the product or the **brand?** And who actually cares? Like **Spotify, Facebook,** or any other product that grew organically from **MVP** outward, by the time it comes to actually **"branding** the product," it probably already has significant traction in

its respective market and a solid user base. Even without a formally initiated **"brand design** process," a startup's digital product already has established its **brand,** not through abstract principles, but through real application and user experiences.

2. FROM LOGOS TO BRAND MARKS

Never before has the role of the logo in a **brand** process been so uncertain. When the line between brand and product design become increasingly blurred, what constitutes the key mark of a brand has shifted remarkably. **Digital** interactions are becoming increasingly less visual and a person's primary interaction with a **brand** may be based upon touch, interaction, or even sound alone. This throws the idea of a logo into question.

The notion of a **brand** mark will live on, that is certain. But the form these brand interactions take may not be visual at all.

Here's a brand mark:

This brand mark comes in the form of a helpful voice:

Even without a logo, this audio branding would need no introduction:

While none of these are a traditional logo, each of them represents a touch point between a human and a **brand.** Just like a logo, these types of interactions represent the tip of the iceberg of a **brand.** These days, a brand mark does not need to be visual—touch, interaction, or sound can equally be a **brand** mark.

3. BRANDING THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

A brand is defined by what a product actually delivers, not by how the marketers tell us how we should feel about it.

I have worked at several **digital** agencies, and lately I've seen a massive increase in the "branding through the back door" approach. By this I mean a rebrand that comes about through organic development of a product or application, rather than the traditional method of **branding** from the top down (strategy, then **brand,** then logo, and then application). The process looks something like this:

- **Digital** agency hired to work on clients' **digital** properties.
- Projects go live.
- Separate from this process, a branding agency is working on an extensive rebrand in an isolated silo.
- Rebrand is at odds with the realities of executing it in **digital** (who would have guessed that a complex logo wouldn't work as a 30-pixel-by-30-pixel icon on mobile?).
- Rounds of costly revisions ensue.
- Client stakeholders realize the gigantic chasm between a 763-page PDF style guide and the realities of creating a digital product.
- Client fires **branding** agency and the 763-page PDF is quietly discarded.
- Digital agency creates new "common sense" **brand** guidelines based on **digital** executions.

Is this a perfect approach? For a **digital** agency happy to be disrupting the old way of doing things, it certainly is good for business. But even though the old branding model is dated and needs to be questioned, the **"branding** through the back door approach" lacks the big picture that a traditional **branding** process offers. **Digital** agencies also need to shift away from simply providing **digital** services and instead move toward a consultation model. The model of future successful **brand** agencies is a hybrid approach of **digital** and **brand,** neither one prioritized over the other.

THE HYBRID AGENCY

The future of successful **branding** agencies in a digital world can be approached in two ways:

1. **Branding** agencies need to move toward a truly integrated model that doesn't just tell people to buy shit, but instead makes things that people want to actually use. The modern **brand** agency needs to build meaningful **brand** experiences, not preach guidelines from a tower of 763-page PDF guideline documents. Don't tell me, show me.

2. **Digital** agencies need to move toward a role of long-term partnership with their clients. Not simply being service providers. While branding agencies may face threats from **digital** agencies, digital agencies also need to be aware that their industry is changing—the days of simply designing websites or apps for clients is over. Offering consultation services to clients is no longer optional in a world where websites can be generated by [Squarespace](#) and other white

label services.

Branding was never just about a logo, picking fonts, or a fancy color palette. Those were just different ways businesses interacted with people. Now, whether you have a logo or a non-visual interaction, what's below the surface— the brand core —is still the same. The days of lengthy PDF style guides might be over, but **branding** is as alive and well as ever. Who will steer the future of the industry however—be it the old branding agencies or new digital disrupters—is still very much up for grabs.

This article first appeared in www.fastcodesign.com