



Define Your Identity

Q: We've recently been presented with some very attractive opportunities that have the potential to really grow our company. How should we evaluate these?

A: Let me offer you congratulations—and caution. Congratulations on having these opportunities; whether you're being presented with potential financing, willing partners, or new capabilities, it's nice to have options. My caution, though, is that sometimes what initially looks like growth actually turns out to be a setup for failure.

In the popular business book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*, author Jim Collins observes that, "A great company is much more likely to die of indigestion from too much opportunity than starvation from too little." He explains that most high-potential companies don't lack for opportunity—the challenge isn't creating opportunities, it's selecting the right ones. "It takes discipline to say 'No, thank you' to big opportunities," he writes. "The fact that something is a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity is irrelevant."

I've found that great brands use their brand to help them make these critical decisions. They establish a clear and focused brand identity and use it as a compass to navigate the flowing waters of opportunity and chart a course toward sustained growth and profitability. Relying on their brands in this way makes sense because it's the best way to ensure they continue to be relevant and create value for customers. By "brand identity" I don't mean your name, logo, or image. I'm talking about your brand essence—at its core, what your brand stands for—and the values and attributes that define and distinguish your brand. You and your team must share a clear, consistent, common understanding of your brand identity so that you can use it as a decision-making tool.

The following are a couple of methods I've used with my clients to achieve this understanding. As you will see, these are fun and provocative ways to get you and your team out of your ingrained way of thinking and to reveal the full potential of your brand meaning.

Shoot a brand documentary. Task your people with making a short video that attempts to capture what your brand stands for. You can form one team or commission several teams to collect varied perspectives and create some healthy competition. Consider joining in on the project as a learning opportunity for you and as a demonstration of the importance of the task to your employees.

The documentary doesn't need to have high production

values; a smartphone to capture clips and an app to edit them together works just fine. The purpose of the video is to highlight examples of how the brand is delivered by employees and experienced by customers. Ideas for content include: news items or media coverage of your brand; recaps of projects or company programs that capture what the brand is all about; interviews with employees who have done something that exemplifies the brand; interviews with your most engaged customers about how they feel about your brand and why; or a story about a defining moment in the company's history.

Once the documentary is complete, give it a title that epitomizes the content. That title will usually point to your brand essence. Common phrases or ideas in the film will reveal key brand values and attributes.

Write your brand's obituary. I realize this sounds a little depressing, but stick with me for a moment. Taking stock of what the world would be like without your brand can be quite clarifying.

Imagine for a moment that your brand has ended its time on earth, and now you need to take stock of what it was all about. Think of your brand as though it was a person, the kind of person your brand would be if it came to life today. Also, think of your brand in terms of its totality—all aspects of the brand experience. If you pretend that you are a local reporter who must write the obituary for this person, your brand, who just passed away today, this invented scenario can help uncover the true nature of your brand. Common themes emerge and point to the most important brand characteristics. The headline you select for the piece will suggest your brand essence, like the title of the documentary in the prior exercise.

In the obituary, answer questions like: What was your brand's biggest accomplishment in life? What will it be remembered for? What will be missing from the world now that it's gone? Who did your brand leave behind? Who will mourn the passing of your brand, and why? Who or what will take your brand's place now and how will they fill its shoes?

Once your brand identity is clearly articulated, it can serve as a decision-making filter to help you set and keep priorities as you consider the growth paths before you. It presents the attributes that must be aligned in any opportunity and outlines the values you never want to compromise. It helps you say "no" with confidence to attractive options that threaten to detract from your core, and "yes" with certainty to your best prospects for successful growth. (For additional exercises and examples of how they've been used, check out my new book, *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest.*) 