

(in truth, rarely unique). A message about expertise is effective, given the facts to back it up, but others can make similar claims. After all, there *are* ten firms in a Top Ten ranking. A message about the firm or its people ensures uniqueness. No two people have worked on the exact same projects, in the exact same role, or have the same degree of recognition.

A message may have several levels, but it must have one clear theme. That theme must resonate throughout the presentation, starting it and summing it up. That theme must carry consistently throughout an advertising campaign—a series of ads building on one strong idea. That theme must repeat throughout a comprehensive marketing communications campaign, so exhibits, advertisements, talks, and even nametags deliver a consistent image and idea.

### **Before Marketing: Developing a Brand and a Strategic Plan**

The theme a firm chooses to carry in all its marketing messages is a key component of the concept known as *branding*. In recent years, the idea of branding has intrigued the design industry. Long associated with product marketing, branding is now moving into the service realm, led by the major consulting firms and real estate organizations. So just what is the concept of branding, and can it work for a design firm?

Simply stated, a product or a service is transformed into a brand when there is an emotional connection with the customer. A brand creates a strong product/service personality, one that transcends the product or service itself. Swatch isn't about keeping time; it's about fashion. McDonald's isn't about hamburgers; it's about family experience. Nike isn't about gym shoes; it's about lifestyle. Brands can be applied to companies, products, and even people (such as Michael Graves or Martha Stewart). A brand is a promise. A brand implies both authenticity and differentiation. A brand is about trust; it makes a continuous promise of future satisfaction.

Positioning is an important first step to the branding aspect of marketing, because developing a brand requires a clearly articulated vision of the company or service, and an absolute commitment to long-term execution. A brand does not happen overnight, simply because someone develops a clever advertising slogan or eye-catching logo. The product or service itself creates the brand, and design professionals are more likely to understand the implications of their brand by talking to their customers than by debating the sub-

ject internally. To develop a brand, designers must understand what their clients expect and deliver on it, continually and consistently. They must keep the promise implied by the brand.

Maintaining a brand takes continuous attention and constant improvement. Companies that manage their brands successfully change their corporate culture to support the brand, infusing enthusiasm for the brand in every employee. They make their product different, not just their advertising. Public relations and advertising are used to support their product or their actions.

The most important aspect of branding is third-party endorsement. How people feel about a brand is more important than what they actually know about it. Branding exemplifies loyalty at the gut level. It is a concept well worth implementing, with clarity and perseverance.

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## MAKING PLANS

### Strategic Planning

A wise design professional will recognize that having a well-defined company identity is not enough. Designers must make careful, thoughtful short-term and long-term plans for their companies. In business school lingo, they must make “strategic plans” and “business plans.” Just the words “strategic planning” can strike fear into the most stalwart of hearts. It implies exhaustive market research, a maze of calculations, hours spent in dimly lit conference rooms arguing with colleagues over wordy mission statements that end up so generic as to be meaningless. In truth, strategic planning can be a simple process that brings designers back to the fundamentals of their practices.

A strategic plan is a broad vision. It looks out over the next three, five, or ten years. Given the rate of change in the design industry, three to five years is the more sensible option. A strategic plan is a positioning exercise, establishing the long-range goals of the firm. It addresses the desired culture of the organization; its position in the industry; its project delivery processes; issues related to people; and perhaps financial performance objectives. It is largely the product of the leaders of the firm, with input from selected senior staff. It can be one page or ten. Ideally, the strategic plan is part of a plan-