

Branding sets companies apart
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A company's brand is more than a name, logo or slogan. It's a description that encompasses everything about the firm, including the products, services and people. The brand represents how the company interacts with its customers, partners and investors and how it differs from its competitors.

That is the view shared by Laura Ries and Steve Ater. Ries is president of the Atlanta consulting firm Ries & Ries and co-author of "The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding," a top seller in the field and one of 11,188 titles on branding offered by Amazon.com.

Ater, brand strategist for the Seattle-based image consulting firm Arscentia, spoke about branding at a full-house session of the Three Rivers Venture Group in Richland in July. He found that such issues as understanding the nature and importance of branding, as well as how to develop a brand, are of high interest to Mid-Columbia businesses.

What is a brand?

"We live in a complex world, and brands are shorthand that we use to decide and indicate preference for things in our lives or businesses," Ries said in an interview.

Ater defined branding as a "recognizable, repeatable experience that represents the essence of what you are." The Coke, Microsoft and Starbucks brands, for example, evoke generally positive responses, he said. In contrast, Ater said, tax and accounting behemoth Andersen Consulting fell from grace after legal improprieties tainted the firm's image. The company reorganized and rebranded itself as Accenture in 2001, with expanded services and a heavy emphasis on business ethics and corporate governance.

Why is branding important?

"The power of a brand rests in its ability to influence purchasing behavior," Ries said. "You don't get any credit for being first or better unless there is a brand in people's minds."

Although the brand name itself is only a word, successful branding creates a perception in the mind of the prospect that there is no other product on the market quite like yours, Ries said. "It doesn't matter how trivial the product is; people will always prefer brand over no brand."

She added that branding is so important that the old expression "Nothing happens until somebody sells something" is being replaced by "Nothing happens until somebody brands something."

Knowing what you really are

Ries urged startups to use branding to stand out from the existing players. One way firms can pinpoint their distinctiveness, Ater said, is to ask: How do you know what you really are? "If you can articulate what you are, what you do and for whom, you are on your way to a pretty good brand," Ater said.

Arscentia digs deep into a company's audience to discover a common ground around which to build the brand identity. It is essential to look outside your usual competitive landscape to ascertain the values and characteristics of other groups that could make up a much wider customer base, Ater said.

"Often you find out that people think you do something else than you think you do," he said, noting that the broader view can also reveal unexpected opportunities.

For example, a motorcycle museum thought of branding itself with a macho biker image when it engaged Arscentia to develop its visual identity. Arscentia looked beyond the stereotype and discovered connections with a broader range of potential visitors, such as patrons of other specialty museums, gourmet cooking, upscale home accessories, lavish entertaining and SUVs. The final branding succeeded because it reflected and attracted these groups, in addition to today's generation-spanning motorcycle culture.

Kim Heuss, marketing and communications director for the Washington Technology Center, led a rebranding campaign recently to sharpen the organization's image. WTC used focus groups to understand how to better convey its mission?making connections to advance technology in Washington state.

Heuss tells small businesses to conduct branding exercises early. "Do it before your audience fixes on an impression you don't want, because it's almost impossible to re-train your audience later," she said.

This is especially true for startups that invariably evolve as they grow, Ater added. "It may seem really cool to name your company after your dog, but it can kill you if it doesn't register with your audience. Whatever you put out there is what you truly do become."

Building the brand

You don't need costly advertising blitzes to build a brand, Reis said. "Word of mouth is a much more powerful tool, because it adds credibility." She advised the chief executives of tech startups to seek out every opportunity to talk about their companies with the media and other influential groups.

"People identify the credibility of a company with its CEO," she said. "If you're the CEO but not the person to do the traveling and make the speeches, recognize

that media want to talk to the captain of the ship and appoint someone else as CEO."