

Web-Centric Branding: Message Mapping and Your Website

Managing your business-to-business brand in a Web-centric, Web-driven world—keeping its messages true to the value you actually offer—begins with understanding and controlling how your website sustains your brand.

For B2B marketers, the website functions as both a strong foundation for your brand's presence in our Web-connected world, and the engine you will use to drive brand messages to your target audiences. Your website also functions—or should function, if properly planned and updated—as the conduit for communication and feedback you receive from your online audience about your company's performance, the evolving needs of the markets you serve and the state of your brand.

Hierarchies: Brands and Websites

Both your brand's architecture and your website's structure can be viewed as a pyramid—and that pyramid can help guide and discipline how your brand messages are mapped to your website.

The top of the pyramid is your *positioning statement*: the core message that sums up your company's fundamental value to your market. The top-level pages on your website need to pay off that message: Home page, About Us page, the main index pages that outline your products and offerings, your key markets and applications—all should leverage and reinforce your positioning statement.

More detailed pages—product descriptions, service offerings, special programs, technical papers and case studies—should be written and designed to communicate the next layers of your brand pyramid: your *values*, competencies and differentials, as well as *product-specific* messages based on the key strengths and benefits they offer.

Additionally, your positioning can be reflected in key metadata fields, such as search engine descriptions and page descriptions where applicable. Communicating your key messages here can help your online audiences differentiate you and connect with your brand.

Website Design is Brand Design

Your brand messages are not only communicated by the words on your website; every aspect of your site's design—its “look and feel”—communicates fundamental messages about your business and the value it offers.

That's why it is crucial to clearly define your brand identity prior to any significant website revision. And if your brand is undergoing a major change—due to acquisitions, market shifts or a new product focus—consider refreshing not only the content that's changing due to these developments, but also address how the information is structured, including the visual style and vocabulary your site uses to support the new face of your brand.

Your brand has a personality—one that includes an emotional dimension that is unique. It is true that in B2B, unlike consumer marketing, your brand is rooted in the real-world value and performance of the products and services you deliver. Nevertheless, your “value” and “performance” can be expressed through words, graphics, photography, typography and other elements of design to convey both ideas and emotions.

Beyond “look and feel,” does your website offer users an experience that reflects the truth about the kind of company you are, and the commitment you’ve made to your brand? Suppose your brand emphasizes applications expertise:

- Is information about that expertise readily available, in the form of case histories and/or white papers?
- Can visitors to your site access live chat features for real-time communications with your engineering experts?
- Do you have user-friendly online tools that your target audience can use to solve applications problems, demonstrating how you understand and support their needs?
- Do design elements and photography incorporate imagery and visual treatments that portray your people as knowledgeable and accomplished in their fields of expertise?

Building and maintaining your website is a constant, time-consuming marketing challenge. But when website content, structure and design are aligned with your brand messages, you have a framework that makes managing that challenge more efficient and effective.

Exercise Message Discipline

Make sure every message, at every level of your website, reinforces your brand. Executing a B2B branding program in a Web-centric world requires focus and discipline, and your website is a key place for sustaining that control.

One way to exercise discipline is to have an effective, well-researched *SEO strategy*. With millions using search engines every day, a successful B2B website is one built around a strong keyword set. And keyword discipline, in turn, can help in building your brand vocabulary; it’s one way to be sure that the words you use are relevant to your audience.

One important SEO practice that relates to branding is keyword themes: building depth of content around specific themes using keyword discipline, using only one or two keywords. The keywords set the theme for the section, and all content in each page should focus on delivering the information and resources that are directly relevant to that theme.

Such discipline ensures that when your target audience uses the keywords you’ve selected to reach your site, you rank highly on the search engine results page, satisfying their search and building brand equity in the process.

For a more productive user experience, make sure to *provide clear calls-to-action*, or next steps, on each page. You’ve stimulated your visitor with useful information or resources, so be sure you strengthen your brand’s value by giving them a clear set of options about what next steps they should take to resolve their issue.

A Strong Website Builds a Web-Centric Brand

It's unfortunate that, in many cases, many B2B websites are unwieldy, overly complex and reflect years of uncoordinated development. They appear to be constructed of compromises, built to satisfy multiple agendas, product management budgets and outdated marketing strategies.

The best websites—B2B or otherwise—demonstrate intrinsic value because they offer the audience fresh, timely and targeted content. To get to that point, however, a company must first clearly establish its brand's messages, ensuring that every detail of its website reflects, sustains and communicates that brand in memorable and effective ways.

Our next Godfrey *Branding in a Web-Centric World* white paper will explore how best to utilize social media in order to build your brand's presence and manage your brands messages in today's highly complex, multi-channel Web-centric world. Please visit www.godfrey.com to view and download white papers on this and other topics.

For more information, contact LANCE BAIRD at 717-393-3831.

E-mail: info@godfrey.com or visit www.godfrey.com

Godfrey provides full-service, integrated business-to-business branding and marketing communications services. The agency offers research, brand management, advertising, public relations, digital marketing, search (SEO and SEM), media, direct marketing and analytics services.