

How Tangible Is Your Brand?

by Mary Weisnewski

From the in-depth audit to the articulation of a brand platform to the day-to-day translation of this framework across a breadth of touchpoints and brand materials, Mary Weisnewski shares the tale of a consulting firm that looked to branding not only as a way to nurture client loyalty and generate new work but also as a path to sustaining the internal values, mission, and identity of its business.



In theory, brand is a great idea; in practice, it's even better. But how do you translate the ideas that embody your company brand into hands-on assets that drive internal and external communications, as well as corporate culture?

The concepts behind your brand become tangible frontline tools when they are rooted in the truth—when they feel authentic to your employees, customers, and business partners and are successfully infused into all operations. That's a tall order, but one worth reaching for. Why? Because what we all really want is brand equity—tangible results that show a return on our investment. We want to see our brand in action—beyond the logo and tagline on our brochures and websites.

Here's the story of how Point B, a national professional services organization with seven markets, revealed its brand, made it tangible, and found success.



Mary Weisnewski, Principal,
Kite Inc.

Revealing the brand platform from the inside out

Brand is everything associated with a company, product, service, or person—all the attributes, tangible and intangible. When an organization is new or small, it organically knows what it stands for and why. Everyone can sit in the same room and be part of decision-making processes. Point B is a perfect example of how, as you expand in size and geographical reach, there arises a need to capture core organizational beliefs—the brand platform—that everyone can use as a daily guide for staying on the same page and strengthening the organization's unique approach to the work it does.

Point B was launched in 1995 by three young Seattle consultants working for a Big Four consulting firm, who decided they wanted their lives back and at the same time wanted to give their clients a better consulting

experience. So they created a firm with a unique and attractive value proposition for its associates: no travel. They also promised to offer the services of only senior-level consultants to help clients with mission-critical projects, such as launching new products and undertaking internal reorganizations.

“In essence, the brand was there from the beginning: to provide project leadership and one-step-ahead thinking,” explains Laura Yurdin, chief communications officer for Point B. “But the company was small enough so that people understood this organically without having to articulate it in a conscious way. And because we are a relationship-driven firm, management didn’t feel the need to express it extensively in marketing materials. For the first nine years, we had a website and a company fact sheet and a focus on simply doing great work for our clients. That was about it.”

That changed in 2002, when the company had grown to 104 employees in three markets, and had plans for further nationwide expansion. Plus, the dot-com bubble had burst, and suddenly there was a proliferation of small-business consulting firms promising the same services as Point B. The company needed to differentiate and own its space, and brand development was the vehicle for doing just that.

The brand platform is the foundation that drives the actions and decisions the firm makes, and also drives the development of all company communications tools. It is revealed by uncovering what people already experience and think of your company. How? By conducting a brand audit with deep-dive interviews, focus groups, and surveys that mine the perceptions of internal leaders, decision-makers, and staff, as well as external clients, partners, and prospects. How do all these people who are integral to your compa-

ny’s success already think of you? How do their experiences and perceptions place you in the competitive marketplace? What are your competitors saying and how are they positioning themselves?

The answers to these questions reveal what customers feel is meaningful and unique about your organization. Using this information as a filter, the brand platform can be defined and captured into tangible tools—mission, guiding principles, promise, personality, tagline, and positioning—that are used as a guide to consistently align decisions, messages, and communications.

“We audited our customers and associates and found out from everything they said, they expected and perceived us to be one step ahead—that is where the value we deliver truly differentiates us from the competition. We articulated that into our brand promise,” Yurdin explains. “That’s the filter all our associates now use for the decisions they make. Even while being so geographically spread out, we can consistently strengthen our brand by all taking the same approach to what we do.”

What does tangible brand look like and feel like?

Too many organizations start with the question of what collateral they need, without first considering a much bigger question: Do you have the tools to implement meaningful messages that emotionally resonate with your audiences in the collateral you do produce?

“We were basically developing an entire cadre of marketing tools and materials—a tagline and a refreshed logo, brochures, stationery, an annual report for customers, a redesigned website—so we spent a lot of time and resources on making sure we did the groundwork properly,” Yurdin says. “The root of successful brand development lies in communicating the appropriate emotions and messages, not just a great idea or beautiful pictures. The brand audit gave us the information we needed to create collateral that effectively connects our associates and clients with our brand.”

The visual brand is a powerful emotional connector to the experience of the brand, making design one of the most tangible differentiation tools. Think Apple, Volkswagen, Target; all use design to connect and differentiate. Establishing the visual elements of the brand is

point**b**®

Where experience leads

A tagline is a tangible tool, a shortcut message that captures and communicates the brand. With its promise of one-step-ahead leadership, the Point B tagline, “Where experience leads,” translates the promise in an emotional and meaningful way to audiences.

more than just picking colors—it’s how the colors are used. It’s the style and feel of photography—faces cropped or long shots? It’s how that font is used—big, small, or centered? It’s the tone of voice, which words are chosen, the energy level conveyed.

Deciding which collateral to develop should be based on what audiences value and what needs to be communicated. Do you have a complicated story to tell? Do customers want to read about you only online, in print, or both? Do you have to communicate to shareholders? Which audiences need to hear different stories? What kind of communications do you need internally? Keep in mind that overload of communications fall on deaf ears, as do messages that are not meaningful. And last but not least, how will these materials be developed, and what will be needed for easy usability? For Point B, that was a key part of the decision—to ensure that the materials could be easily customized for the firm’s on-the-go associate population and be delivered onsite to clients.

Living the brand

Making the values of the organization tangible means defining what they are and then living them. This is where the hard work starts, and it is often where organizations go wrong. They define the brand and then put it on a shelf. It becomes a book of words that never gets used. The only thing worse than having no values is investing time and money to establish values and then not “walking the talk” with them.

Remember, internal education takes time, care, and patience. All employees need to understand that every touch-point is an opportunity to strengthen or dilute the brand. There are no neutrals. How the phone is answered, how the label is put on the package, which features are developed in the new product, how customer service is handled—all these are tangible brand experiences. For example, if the brand promise is “fast,” then speed is the approach that will rise to the top in everything each employee does in his or her daily job. Speed would be a major aspect of the personalities judged in potential hires, and speed would be an indicator of job performance in employee reviews. It would permeate the organization and be built on every day, by everyone. The organi-

zation would be known for its speed and would deliver on this at every opportunity.

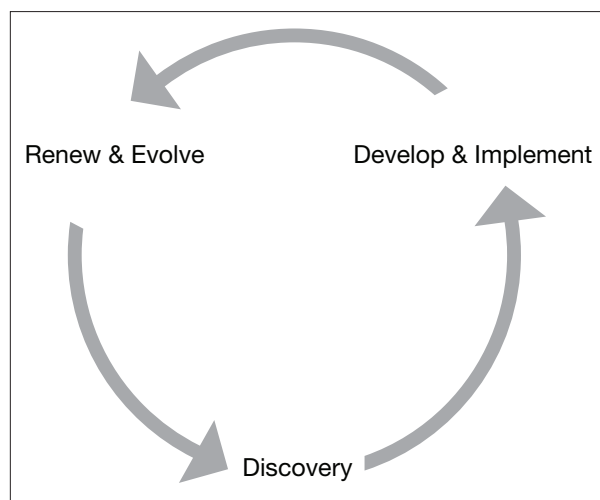
Point B’s brand promise, “one step ahead,” is carried out through employee actions in the following ways:

- Anticipating contingencies and client needs
- Being nimble and flexible
- Shedding light on issues critical to success
- Applying experience, maturity, vision, and judgment
- Thinking about and then getting clients where they need to be
- Utilizing the collective wisdom of the firm to provide better outcomes

“Our associates tell us time and again how proud they are to be part of a company that sets the bar so high and consistently meets it,” Yurdin says. “Their attitude and loyalty is a tangible result of the brand platform that can be seen on a daily basis.”

A powerful way to understand brand and how to use it in a tangible way is to think of it as sacrifice. Everyone has heard that you can’t be all things to all people if you want to have a strong brand. Well, turn that around and it means you have to make sacrifices every day to have a strong, focused brand.

“For a business that is so relationship-driven, it is difficult to say no, but sometimes that’s what we have to do in order to be true to our core values,” says Yurdin, who can recall times



In order to keep a brand healthy, alive, and relevant, it must continually evolve while remaining true to its essence. The innovation can be company-led, but it must always be consumer-informed. Managing a brand is a thoughtful, methodical, and long-term commitment to discovery, development, and evolution.

Being a brand-driven organization means doing business on purpose, with purpose:

- Know the customers you seek, and the ones you don't.
- Be conscious about how you treat employees, partners, vendors, and customers.
- Understand the care that goes into the product or service you deliver.
- Be diligent in sticking to your overriding principles.

Tangible brand leads to:

- Ongoing affirmation of purpose
- Organizational alignment
- Differentiation
- Stronger relationships and connections
- Increased recognition
- Stronger recruitment
- Increased ROI

What's in a brand platform?

- **Mission.** Mission explains why the organization exists, its reason for being. It should be easy to understand, easy to remember, and inspiring.
- **Guiding principles.** Guiding principles are the values that drive the culture of the organization and define its belief system.
- **Promise.** Promise is the everyday shortcut to the brand that all staff can use to guide daily decision-making. It defines the unique approach you want to be known for.
- **Personality.** Personality is the way you'd describe the character of the organization if it were a person. It defines the appropriate look, feel, and tone of voice of all communications.
- **Positioning.** Positioning is the foundation for all your messages, and how you are positioned in the marketplace against your competition. It is your value proposition.

when Point B turned down business because it wasn't a good fit to ensure success for everyone. "It is often in the best interest of our clients—it doesn't make sense to charge clients the rate our associates command for services that are not what they need, and it wouldn't be fair to our associates to be put in a position in which they could not leverage their unique experience and skills. We provide leadership. Period. That's the brand platform that differentiates us, and it doesn't make good business sense to dilute it for short-term gains."

Real brand means real ROI

The bottom line: Tangible brand boosts the real value of your company. Authentic actions based on your core values result in immediate and long-term benefits, as well as passion, trust, and loyalty from your customers and employees.

"A lot of our return on investment in our brand is immeasurable—it's the deepening of relationships, the strengthening of loyalty, and the pride that associates take in working for Point B," Yurdin says. "But there are also many instances in which we believe our authentic brand has led to growth and increased profits."

Point B has expanded from three markets into seven markets during the past five years. In each of these, the company has been able to attract top consultants, and it now has a total of more than 350 employees nationwide. That's tangible brand in action. You can hire the best people because people want to work for the best companies. Put another way, if you are clear about your brand—what you stand for and who you are—you hire people who are a good fit with your organization. They will deliver on-brand experiences and stay longer, reducing turnover. All this adds up to a high return on investment in developing an authentic brand platform and staying true to it.

When you attract the best employees, you attract top-notch clients who expect the kind of service your company can now deliver. Both factors are reflected in the *Wall Street Journal* honoring Point B as a Winning Workplace in 2007. Now, that's a tangible result of brand.

You can't fake it

It's all about trust. When a brand delivers consistently on what it says it will do, there are tangible results—long-lasting relationships with employees, customers, and the community.

Trust results from a reliable cache of perceptions and experiences built over time. We think of organizations just as we do of people we know. If I've heard of you, I'm more likely to trust you; if you do what you say you are going to do, I'll trust you. If you do this repeatedly, I'll become a raving fan of yours. I'll even recommend you to everyone I know. On the other hand, if you say one thing and do another, or look and act differently each time I see you, you'll chip away at my trust, and I'll go elsewhere to work and/or do business.

The final word on tangible brand is authenticity. A brand that is true to your company values is a powerful ambassador for your vision and values. An authentic brand rallies your troops and builds a loyal base of customers who also become messengers happy to spread the word and expand your business. ■

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