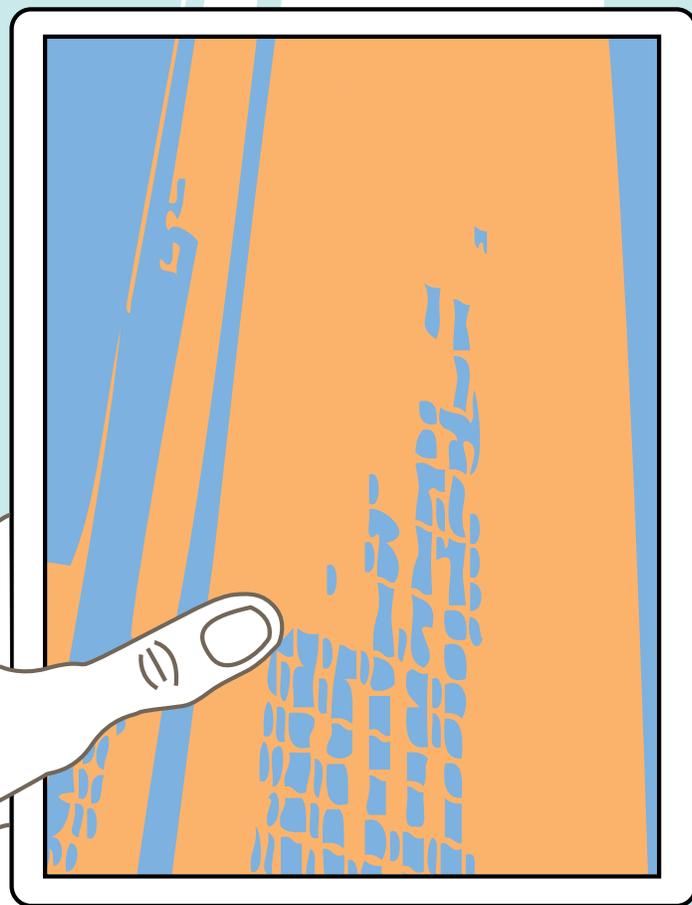


BRANDED

Fresh Thinking About
Branding And Marketing



Envisioning Your Brand

Unlocking the Power of Visual Cues

DeSantis
Breindel

The ironic thing about your brand's image is that you can't actually see it. Image as it relates to your brand is a metaphor, an idea meant to conjure up the assured sense of truth that comes with witnessing something concrete (and hopefully positive) with your own eyes. Your customers can't see loyalty, trust, or any other quality, but an effective brand strategy can help them make the connection. First though, you'll need to learn to see these qualities yourself.

If you're having trouble expressing your brand, there's a good chance your customers will too.

There's no question that analyzing your brand's image and current positioning is a challenging undertaking. Creating a mental model of your company that meshes with customer perception is a process heavy on abstract thought, made even more difficult by being on the inside looking out. How can you compare your brand to your competitors' when your priorities seem different or when you are striving at different goals? How can you assess and understand your own brand's outward-facing image when you're positioned squarely on the inside?

If you have trouble expressing the strengths and weaknesses of your brand, there's a good chance your customers will too. Or worse, they'll ignore you.

Oftentimes, clients will enter the brand-building process knowing only that their brand is underperforming and needs improvement. They see a company image that they're unhappy with without being able to pinpoint the root causes of that dissatisfaction. Sometimes they're reluctant to even acknowledge that there are root causes, not because they avoid accepting fault, but because they view their brand in terms and ideas that are simply too abstract to investigate and act upon.

Being able to view a brand as a concrete entity, a vessel that can carry attributes, aspirations, and identity is the first step in coming up with an actionable plan to improve it and better define it for the customer. Without developing meaningful anchors and associations for one's brand or image, it simply floats around, impossible to fully grasp. Fixing such an untethered brand is like trying to throw darts into the mist.

When presented thoughtfully, visual cues, the process of using visual rather than intellectual elements to uncover deep-seated opinion and insights, can be invaluable tools for brand analysis and planning. Not only can they help unearth hidden assumptions and essential truths about your brand's image and communications, they can also help paint a clearer picture of the market's perception of your product or services compared to that of your competitors.

Visual cues can also serve as a collaborative tool that encourages teamwork and unifies groups around shared notions. As such, the ability to gain insights through concrete visual cues and metaphors can be critically helpful at this early, but pivotal, stage of brand assessment.

Visual metaphors can uncover insights about where the brand is today and where it needs to go in the future.

Oftentimes, it's easier for a group to agree on a symbol (and what that symbol represents) than a set of abstract, personalized thoughts that ultimately stand for that same idea.

Visual thinking can be an effective brand-building tool in a number of ways. Though you may initially have difficulty expressing perceived strengths and weaknesses of your brand, visual metaphors can bring them to the fore. Instead of focusing on the abstract elements of your brand strategy, focus instead on how your brand is alike or different from symbols and objects you can readily see, grasp and feel.

One method that has proven to be incredibly effective is free association. In this process, small groups of internal stakeholders (employees, management) are shown a group of related images, such as six types of beverages or six different tools, and asked to identify which image reflects the corporate brand today and which image the brand should be in the future. The real insight comes, not from the image that is chosen, but the honest, unfiltered explanation of why.



When going through any rebranding project, leveraging the power of image can be an incredibly effective way to uncover deep-seated brand insights.

For example, during a recent rebranding project with a client in the energy industry, we conducted this free association method to uncover key insights about the client's existing brand. A dozen employees were asked to pick the beverage image that best represented their brand today. Five employees chose the same image – a bottle of water. Interestingly, when asked why they chose this image, the answers greatly varied. One employee picked the

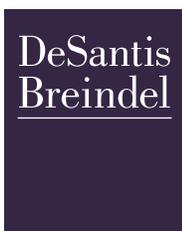
The knowledge uncovered through visual cues is inherently emotional rather than intellectual.

bottle of water because it represented something important, necessary for survival, but often overlooked. Another saw the bottle of water as plain and boring, not sexy. When we asked the same group to choose the image that best reflected where the brand needed to be in the future, many employees were drawn to an image of a cup of coffee, because it represented a habit, a wake-up call, something that could not be ignored.

As this example demonstrates, working through a set of connected but unique symbols can lead to specific and productive insight about where the brand is today and where it needs to go in the future. The transference, symbolism and consensus building that occurs in such an exercise are akin to what you hope to accomplish with your brand out in the marketplace. The strength of connection needs to be just as strong.

Visual metaphors not only enable companies to think of their brand with increased clarity and depth, but they also provide brand strategists with information that is far more insightful than assumptions from less anchored conversations. As a company works through set after set of images, it maps its positions on key aspirational qualities. Scores of otherwise inaccessible data are collected, analyzed, compared with market research, and finally assembled into a comprehensive dossier exploring the brand at its core and offering concrete guidance on how to improve the brand moving forward.

Leveraging the power of the image, when going through any rebranding project, can be an incredibly effective way to uncover deep-seated opinion and insight about where your brand is today and where it needs to go in the future. The knowledge uncovered from free association and other activities that incorporate visual cues is very different than the knowledge you gain through a survey or standard Q&A session – it is inherently emotional rather than intellectual. Understanding how a brand is perceived on both levels is a critical step in developing a truly successful brand strategy.



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About DeSantis Breindel

DeSantis Breindel is a B2B branding and marketing firm based in New York. At critical inflection points, we work with our clients to align brand and marketing strategy with business strategy—creating stories and experiences to engage customers, influence prospects, rally employees, inspire investors and build communities. To learn more go to www.desantibreindel.com

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