

Branding Essentials for Value-Added Agriculture Enterprises

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Is there a particular brand of shoes you buy, restaurant where you prefer to stop when you need a quick bite to eat or cold drink you reach for when nothing else will do? Are all of the tractors on your farm the same color—perhaps John Deere green or Case IH red? Are you a die-hard Chevrolet, Dodge or Ford pickup fan? You may recognize your favorite product or service by seeing a specific symbol or logo or hearing a familiar jingle. When you encounter a brand, you call upon what you have seen, heard and experienced to generate your perception of quality and value.

Customers have many choices in the marketplace. Branding not only influences your own purchasing decisions but also can significantly impact the customers you aim to entice to buy your value-added agriculture products.

Effective branding is a crucial component of an overall marketing strategy that builds both tangible and intangible value in your business. Branding can help your farm and its products stand out among competitors while building strong, lasting relationships with customers. When done well, branding resonates with target customers and builds recognition, trust and goodwill—all of which help to increase sales and customer loyalty. The perception of your brand's product and service quality may even entice customers to pay more for your product than they would a competing product. These loyal customers also often become enthusiastic brand advocates, spreading positive word-of-mouth that increases both your farm's lifetime value per customer—the total revenue a customer brings over their relationship with your brand—and brand equity—the value of your business that is built through your branding.

This publication introduces branding and the elements of the branding mix to help you develop or refine your farm brand. It also provides eight tips to help you implement an effective farm brand strategy.

WHAT IS A BRAND?

A brand defines your farm's identity and character, representing the image you want to portray to target customers and differentiating it from the competition. It tells the story of who you are and what you value. Key elements such as a brand name, logo, tagline or slogan, design elements (such as shapes and colors) and tone of voice all contribute to supporting your brand and shaping its image among customers. However, branding goes beyond these basics; it encompasses every aspect of a customer's experience with your farm, product or service, ultimately forming their perception.

For example, imagine this scenario:

A customer pushes open the weathered wooden door of a quaint cheese shop. The air is filled with the inviting aroma of aged cheddar and smoked gouda emanating from the cheese sample table. Above the counter hangs a sign made from weathered barn wood; its lettering, hand-painted in white in a warm, inviting script, proudly displays the name "Rolling Meadows Creamery." The logo—a stylized illustration of a contented cow grazing on rolling hills—adds to the charm. An employee dressed in clean jeans and a crisp white collared shirt warmly welcomes the customer and invites them to explore the shop. Through a picture window, the customer can see the farm's dairy cows grazing peacefully. Carefully curated decorations create a cohesive brand experience inside the shop. Vintage tablecloths adorn rustic wooden tables, showcasing an array of cheeses available for tasting. Baskets overflowing with fresh bread and local honey flank the entrance, each package carrying the same "Rolling Meadows Creamery" logo with a touch of whimsy. Framed photos lining the wall showcase the farm's rich history, telling a compelling story about the farm family's heritage.

In this example, the customers are immersed in the authentic sights, sounds, aromas, touches and tastes that reflect the authenticity, warmth and high-quality of the "Rolling Meadows Creamery" brand. Through consistent branding during their visit, as well as pre-visit marketing interactions and post-visit communications, the customers' perceptions of and relationship with the "Rolling Meadows Creamery" brand is cultivated.



CRAFTING YOUR BRAND

Creating a brand takes time, planning and intention. To develop your brand concept, focus on the six elements of a branding mix: targeting, voice, identity, promise, values and positioning. In this section, you will find a discussion of each of the six elements of the branding mix with examples as well as questions for your consideration to help you begin crafting your branding concept.

Identify as many characteristics of this target customer as possible including demographics, psychographic and behavioral characteristics. Demographics include such attributes as age, geographic location, family status and income level. Psychographic aspects point to personal values, attitudes and aspirations. Behavioral aspects include shopping behaviors and purchasing habits.



For example, a dairy producer developing a brand of local cow milk cheeses may describe their target audience as younger females (ages 25-45) with at least some college education, a relatively small household size, and higher than average household income. These consumers are interested in high-quality products, knowing how their food is produced and supporting the local economy. They often shop at farmers markets and on-farm retail stores within 50 miles of the farm. They may commonly purchase Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares. They enjoy cheese as a delicious and nutritious source of protein and calcium, perfect for snacking at home, on the go, or for entertaining.¹

1. Brand Targeting

Like all parts of your marketing strategy, branding begins with identifying your target audience and understanding their needs, values and preferences. A common rule of thumb is that 20 percent of your customers will account for 80 percent of your sales. Consider who makes up this important segment of your market that has the following characteristics:

1. A need or desire that you can fulfill,
2. A willingness to purchase your product, and
3. The ability to purchase your product at a price high enough to generate a profit and meet your financial goals.

APPLY THIS

Who is your target audience?
What are their needs, values and preferences?

Based on what you have learned about your target audience and their needs, values and preferences, you can begin to carefully craft the remaining brand elements (including voice, identity, promise, values and positioning) that will guide the development of your brand materials and marketing efforts.

¹This example is provided for illustrative purposes only and should not be interpreted as current market information.

2. Brand Voice

Your brand voice is the consistent personality and emotion that you infuse into your company's communications. Your voice is your brand's steady personality that your customers will come to know and hopefully love.

Choose your brand voice to speak to and appeal to your target customers while being authentic to your values and story. The brand voice should be consistently transmitted through all forms of communication, including personal conversations, product packaging and labeling information, point of purchase material messaging, signage, website and social media content, etc. It helps to humanize your brand, showcase your values, and distinguish yourself from competitors.

A farm brand, for example, may have a nostalgic tone centered around the farm or family heritage, or an educational tone to inspire sustainability or innovation. A farm brand voice may also exude authentic farm life or play into a light and fun "storybook farm" experience.

APPLY THIS

Describe the personality traits of your brand that you would like to share with customers.

What aspects of the voice will resonate with your target customers?



3. Brand Identity

Brand identity refers to aspects of your company that are visually recognizable to customers. This includes your company's color palette, logo and fonts/lettering as well as how you visually present yourself on social media and through the company website. Brand identity also refers to your company's physical presentation, including how you design your packaging and labeling, merchandise your products, craft the ambiance of your facilities, choose the dress code for your staff and other tangible aspects of your brand. Once again, your brand identity should be developed to catch the attention of your target audience and align with their needs, values and preferences while being consistent with who you are.

A farm brand that is targeting families with children for a storybook farm experience may choose to incorporate a red barn complete with cupola and weathervane, cartoonish farm animals or crop images and denim or overalls. A farm brand centered around family heritage and high-quality products may choose a color palette of warm, earthy brown, black and white with more realistic images of animals or crops.

APPLY THIS

Keeping your target audience in mind, how can you make your brand visually recognizable and appealing?

Are there certain colors, shapes, images, and/or font styles to consider for your materials?

4. Brand Promise

The brand promise is how you articulate the unique benefits that your business provides customers and is often the focus of a company's mission statement and guiding principles and policies. It is a commitment that you are making to your customers—a promise you can and will keep. Customers will set expectations by this promise and hold your brand accountable.

Consider what benefits your target customers are looking for from the products and services you offer and what is important for them to support with their dollars. The more aligned your company's actions are with your brand promise, the more trust and loyalty you will cultivate.

A brand promise will be as unique as the business. A farm providing fresh foods grown on their farm and by other local farmers to customers who seek wholesome, nutritious ingredients and to support local farms may focus their brand promise around “cultivating healthy farms and families.” A farm offering seasonal experiences for families with small children seeking to spend quality time together, however, may choose to focus their brand promise on “growing traditions and harvesting memories.”

APPLY THIS

What makes your product a match for your specific target audience?

How are you better than or unique from the competition?



5. Brand Values

Brand values are the guiding principles and beliefs that your company stands for. By articulating your values and aligning your brand with something bigger and more meaningful than yourself, your customers will see that your brand is relatable and real—that you are more than your product and service offerings. Brand values help customers determine how supporting your business helps support the causes they are passionate about or change the world in ways that are also important to them.

Brand values may encompass a wide range of principles or ideals. A value-added agriculture enterprise may have values surrounding environmental sustainability, humane treatment of animals, agriculture education, farmland preservation, support for the local economy, providing access to local foods (food security), creating memories, encouraging people to spend time outside or a number of other beliefs.

APPLY THIS

What are the values or principles guiding your farm business that will resonate with your target customers?





APPLY THIS

What image do you want your brand to hold in the minds of your target customers? Use the formula provided above to draft a positioning statement for your brand.

6. Brand Positioning

Brand positioning refers to the image you want your brand to hold in the minds of your target customers through your marketing strategy, tactics and materials. To be most effective, your brand promise should encompass what your brand does best that overlaps with the benefits customers are seeking and how your brand is different and/or better than competitors (Figure 1) (Blaess, n.d.). Your positioning is most often used with internal teams and acts as a compass to help you share a consistent message through every customer interaction with your brand.

Many sources suggest using a template or formula such as the one provided below can be helpful in developing an effective brand positioning statement. The formula includes four main components:

1. Target Audience: Who is your target audience?
2. Differentiation: What makes your brand unique?
3. Value or Benefit: What does your brand provide to the target audience?
4. Reason to Believe: What proof or evidence do you have?

These four components can be combined into a sentence or paragraph:

For [Target Audience], [Brand Name] is the [your market category] that [Differentiation] so they can [Benefit].

As an example, think back to the scenario presented at the beginning about a customer visiting “Rolling Hills Creamery.” A potential brand positioning for “Rolling Hills Creamery” may be:

For the **artisanal food enthusiast**, **Rolling Hills Creamery** is the **only local dairy** that **offers a variety of small-batch cheeses** where every cheese reflects the rich heritage of our family-run farm and provides an **unforgettable flavor experience**.

Your Brand Positioning



Figure 1: Ideal Brand Positioning

Source: Blaess, Nine



TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE BRAND DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Developing and refining your brand begins with the six brand elements described above, which take time and intention. Incorporating the eight tips discussed in this section into your brand development and implementation strategies can help extract the most brand equity from your investments of time and marketing dollars.

1. Be mindful of your target customer's needs, values and preferences.

Marketing is all about understanding your target audience and developing marketing strategies, including branding, to reach that target audience. As you develop your branding mix and brand elements, be sure to keep these key customers at the forefront of your mind. How will you communicate that you have what they need and offer the benefits they are seeking? How will you communicate that your business or products embody what is important to them or that you share similar values? What message is most important for you to portray through your branding to reach these customers and entice them to learn more, purchase your products, deepen their relationship with your farm and become lifetime customers?

2. Offer a high-quality product, service and/or experience consistently.

Many customers believe local products are of higher quality than non-local products. Higher quality is often associated with freshness, healthiness, wholesomeness and/or taste (Feldman and Hamm, 2015). Before offering a product, service or experience to customers, it is important to ensure you provide the high-quality potential customers expect. If the quality is not what customers are seeking, you may lose the opportunity for repeat sales and damage the brand value you are trying to build.

Customers also expect to experience the same level of quality each time they partake of your product, service or experience. Thus, providing a high-quality experience consistently is very important. If customers have an unsatisfactory experience during the second, third or subsequent purchase, they may move on to a competing product. By providing high-quality products consistently, you have the opportunity to build a strong relationship with customers who may then be more forgiving if, at some point in the future, there is an issue with a product, or an employee has an off-day.



3. Be authentic to who you are.

The story behind a farm, business, person, product, service or experience can add value. Your story includes anything from the history of the farm, the history of the farm family, farm practices, daily happenings on the farm and the farm's position or role in the community to its mission, vision and values. Customers are often willing to choose or pay more for the story and shared values behind products, services and experiences, such as sustaining farmland and support for local farms and economies (Bond and Thilmany, 2008). Your story and personality are unique from any other farm, business or organization. Sharing your story helps to build trust and connections with customers who often look for transparency and authenticity when seeking out local products.

4. Be consistent in the image you portray.

It is important that every aspect of your product, service, experience or business that customers come in contact with portrays a consistent image or message to customers. As part of your marketing plan, you should develop a positioning statement consistent with your target audience's needs, values and preferences that describes the unique value of your product you want to convey to your customers. Then, as you develop and implement your marketing strategies and branding elements, check them against your positioning statement to make sure those strategies and materials are sending the message you outlined in your positioning statement. This will make it easier for customers to recognize and understand who you are and what you represent. Inconsistencies may make it more difficult for your brand to solidify in their minds or cause confusion which may cause them to question your authenticity or credibility.

Consider how you present your business across your website, social media and/or email newsletter and how that aligns with what the customer sees when looking at your product. For instance, if you say that sustainability is important to your business processes, will the customer agree when looking at product packaging or shipping materials?



5. Consider how your brand concept may be shared and received through all five senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste).

Shopping and buying are sensory activities. Customers can be attracted or turned off by any number of sights, smells, sounds, textures or tastes. Visual appeal, or lack thereof, typically has the most powerful impact on shopper behavior; however, the sense of smell also powerfully connects to long-term memory and influences emotions and creativity (Casarella, 2022). Do not discount the impact of a tasty sample to encourage the purchase of a new product, a tagline or jingle to trigger a fond memory or the ability of a customer to pick up a product to create an attachment.

Think about how grocery stores often have fresh baked bread and rotisserie chickens strategically placed near the entrance so shoppers encounter those smells as they enter and begin to shop. Realtors sometimes suggest to homeowners trying to sell to bake cookies before a showing, so the aroma will foster a sense of familiarity and home to prospective buyers.



6. Focus on points of potential customer interactions (touchpoints) with the product, the environment the customer is in and the service(s) provided.

Every interaction your customer has with your business, product or people has an impact on the value your customer places on your brand. Strategically tracing your customers' steps as they move through their experiences with your brand, from awareness of your product to engagement, evaluation, experiences and loyalty, will allow you to identify areas of strength and areas potentially in need of improvement. Identifying these pain points will allow you an opportunity to adjust strategies to provide an improved experience for customers, increasing the value of your brand.

Customer journey mapping is a tool you can use to think about your customers' journey in a guided, organized fashion. This tool can help you better understand and analyze your touchpoints or interactions with your customers pre-purchase, point-of-sale and post-purchase. Learn more about customer journey mapping in University of Tennessee Extension PB 1927, Journey Mapping: An Effective Tool for Understanding Customer Experiences available online at tiny.utk.edu/JourneyMap.



7. Be intentional about sharing your brand.

You have or will invest a lot of time and capital into developing your brand assets and promotional materials. Make a point to use and share these resources to get the most return on your investment.

Some examples of methods to share your brand and connect with customers include:

- Using your brand color palette consistently across your marketing materials, product merchandising and web presence.
- Including your logo and tagline, website URL and social media links in your e-mail signature, on business cards and any printed promotional materials.
- Creating an attractive sign asking customers to join you on social media, sign up for your email newsletter or share photographs of themselves visiting your farm or enjoying your projects.
- Adding links to your social media accounts from your website and including your website URL in your social media profile information.
- Adding your logo, tagline and/or mascot to promotional items (“swag”) that you may give away, such as reusable bags, hats or mugs.
- Attending or sponsoring local events. This will give you the opportunity to showcase your products, network and build relationships, or simply provide an outlet for sharing your marketing materials.

8. Test and monitor your brand and brand elements.

As stated earlier, you will likely invest much time, effort and capital into creating your brand. Over time, you also may want to make changes or improvements to certain elements. Test these changes to your brand elements with target audience members prior to implementation. This can be done by showing them mock-ups of logos, promotional materials and other items either individually or in a small group setting and asking for their feedback. Brand testing will allow you to “not only determine the positive impact on the identity/position but also to discover any unforeseen negative reactions” (Aaker, pp 188). Imagine your relief from avoiding an awkwardly phrased tagline or misperception from an ad display.

Tracking assesses how your brand is perceived and allows you to evaluate your brand equity. You can track through either quantitative measures, such as survey questions on customer satisfaction with scale choices, or qualitative measures, such as customer interviews to gauge perceptions regarding perceived value or brand personality. The key is to perform tracking activities on a regular basis as this will allow you to measure customer perceptions over time and how they may/may not change in response to your marketing activities and any modifications you make to brand assets.



SUMMARY

A brand is the combination of brand elements, including the brand name, associated words, symbols/logo and design elements that identify your product and farm and differentiate it from the competition. Brand identity also goes beyond visual clues to include your brand's personality (e.g., energetic, humorous, adventurous) and relationship position (e.g., friend, advisor).

Creating a successful brand takes time, planning and intention. Start by concentrating on the six elements of a branding mix: targeting, voice, identity, promise, values and positioning. This will help you connect the needs and preferences of your target audience with who you are and what you value.

A strong farm brand cultivates trust, customer loyalty and repeat sales. It motivates customers to become enthusiastic brand advocates. Brand equity, the value of your brand to your business, is earned over time as customers interact with various brand elements, promotional and communication pieces, products, places, services and experiences.





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Funding for this publication was made possible by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through grant AM21DBITN005, AM21DBITN1008, and AM22DBITN1013. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.

PB 1930 3/25 Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and County governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.