What does your brand say? It's easy to explain how Coke has become a brand after 100 years of advertising and marketing efforts, but sometimes, it is very difficult to explain how a dentist creates a brand with relatively few resources, in just one community, and in a short period of time.

It always starts with a great product, a great location, and a great in-office experience. However, many dental practices with all of these necessary requirements, (and they are all necessary) never really build a "brand." Something else must be required and I’m going to try to explain it in very simple terms in this article.

Many marketing experts talk about brands, but for this discussion, let's not be so concerned about brand building as we are building a loyal community of believers in your dental services. We may even refer to them as patriots, fans and advocates. As a dental professional, you may not relate to actually building a brand, but you do think a lot about the group of people that prefer your products and services—your patients.

In the simplest of terms, brand building can be boiled down to the fact that brands are belief systems. Once you think of a brand as a belief system, you automatically understand the things that giant companies spend billions of dollars trying to obtain: trust, quality, vision, values, leadership, and on and on.

4 simple steps
Building a brand for a dental practice can be broken into four simple steps. These steps are critical to brand building for any small service business, but they are a perfect plan for any dental professional to follow.

Number One is a creation story. Apple Computer is about a couple of guys who built personal computers in their parent's garage. Nike started with a guy making running shoes with a waffle iron. UPS was started by a 15-year-old with a bicycle. Who are you?

Even if you don't have a personal creation story, where were you born? Where did you go to high school? Where did you go to dental school? Are you married? Kids? Do you love dogs?

Branding pioneer Jack Trout asserts that the creation story is critical, simply because that story “is often at the heart of being different and successful.”

Number Two. What are you about? All belief systems have a credo that boldly claims what you believe in. Do you think different? Do you have any special training that influences your treatment philosophy? Do you provide an extra level of service, or do you provide any products and services that other dentists don’t?

Number Three. Once we know where you’re from and what you’re about, show us who you are. All great brands have visual icons or symbols that sum up who they are and what they’re about. The Nike swoosh, The Stars and Stripes. The Olympic Rings. Icons are not just

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logos and images, but they spark the other senses as well. The taste of McDonald’s French fries, the smell of BMW leather trim, the feel of a Tommy Bahama silk shirt, and the Coca Cola jingles we’ve all memorized.

Number Four. Every powerful brand has a set of sacred words that are associated with the product or service. These sacred words are found in every component of the brand’s packaging, advertising, and sales literature. The sacred words are constantly on the lips of every member of the corporate team. They are spoken by celebrity voices and show up at sports arenas, airports and the pages of Time Magazine. We believe the sacred words because they become a part of our subconscious and part of the fabric of our society.

The branding steps at work. Take Coke. The creation story is about Dr. John Pemberton creating a carbonated drugstore beverage. The creed is about “the real thing.” The icons are the shapely bottle profile and the Coke red ribbon. The sacred words include “Coke,” “It’s the real thing,” “Coke is it,” and other words exclusive to the Coke experience.

Consider the iPod. The creation story has to do with bringing Steve Jobs back into the Apple empire and the redesign of personal computing and Apple Corp. The creed is about delivering sound and pictures in portable ways like no other company has ever tried. The icons are the elegant design of the iPod and the striking two-color ads. The sacred words are the product names that surrounds the “i” universe — iPod, iTunes, iPhoto — a hip naming convention followers have stolen.

Is it working? Do Diet Coke drinkers get upset on the airline when they find that they only serve Pepsi products? Try taking an iPod away from its owner and replacing it with a Sony MP3 player.

When people believe, they belong. When they belong to the group that surrounds your dental services, they are willing to refer friends and family to your practice. Remember the last time you moved? Where did you find out about the best grocery store? The best church? The auto mechanic who wouldn’t rip you off? Probably from someone who already “belonged” to their group, someone who preferred them above all others and was willing to advocate that preference.

Branding is a process that can help you position your dental products and services by creating a community of people to surround them. Brands are built by providing products and services that people can believe in.

Don’t become another generic dentist. To the general public it can be difficult to differentiate one dentist from another. This difficulty has been magnified for decades, by dentists who offer no special competitive advantage or unique approach to dentistry. The shame is that with the cutting-edge equipment, procedures, and high-tech dental philosophies in place, it isn’t very hard to be special. Especially, since only a small percentage of the dentists in the industry seem to understand the unique opportunity that is before them.

Update your old equipment. Become comfortable with cosmetic dentistry. Invest in a laser and digital radiography. Spend some money perfecting your front office with one of the many invaluable patient education systems available. Expand your hours. Hire a practice management coach and perfect your craft. Then, when you have done these things and more, shout it from the top of your roof!

Interested in speaking to Joel about developing your brand? E-mail him at Joel@thedentistsnetwork.net.

About the author

Joel Harris is a co-founder and president of Intelligent Dental Marketing located in Salt Lake City, Utah. His company provides powerful marketing tools to help dentists grow their patient base, increase the profit and improve their image. Joel is also the author of the book “Breakthrough Dental Marketing.” His e-mail address is jharris@idmtools.com.