

When the going gets tough the tough get branding

1. Should we really invest in branding during a recession?

The simple answer is absolutely you should. With fewer buyers still confronted with a myriad of choices, it's crucial that your brand stands out from the pack, grabs attention and quickly communicates what's special about you, your offer and the benefits of being your customer.

2. Is a new logo likely to change our fortunes?

Reviewing your branding is much more than a redrawing of a logo. A project should result in a clear and concise articulation of what your company stands for, the benefits of what you offer and how you express yourself to your audiences as well as creative executions. It's true to say that the logo is a point at which the story starts and if it doesn't work in that way it's possible it should be revised. But there is immense value to be had from putting in place a set of guidelines on how everybody in the company can describe it and which behaviors build brand value as opposed to threaten it.

3. We can't slash fixed costs quickly - isn't marketing the best budget to cut?

Savings may be available but to cut marketing activity would be wrong. It's the time when you should be concentrating your minds and your expenditure on marketing the areas in which you have most strength and differentiation, and if that's not clear, get an external branding consultancy to examine how your story stacks up to an objective, customer oriented point of view. Stop thinking inside- out and take an outside-in look. Be ready with a preemptive answer to a customer who sees your communications and asks 'so what, what's in it for me?'

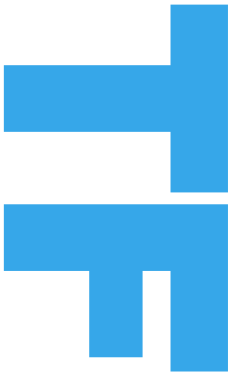
4. Why use a brand consultancy instead of doing it in house?

You will have built up your brand story over time; some clients' reflect organisational politics as much as marketing strategy. It's possible that the story is cluttered but an incisive agency will get to the nub of what it is you need to say and how to say it in order to support your business and cut out the superfluous and confusing stuff. Now of all times you need be as direct as possible with your audience and not leave too much for them to work out.

5. What should I look for in a consultancy?

The best agencies will not be afraid to express opinions or make recommendations – there's no time for long periods of education, exploration and testing, it's a climate where agility and decisiveness will win through. With so much depending on your ability to engage and retain customers, the brand under which you trade should be subject to attention of your highest level of management and your agency should be comfortable and experienced in dealing with the board and not shy of the odd debate. It's also really important that you get on with the people and know who you are dealing with throughout the project, look out for bait & switch tactics.

[Continued ...](#)



6. Should I only brief people that work in my industry?

In a market where you need differentiation, it's a good idea to be a bit bolder, an agency with a broad range of sector experience could see things differently and ideas from other markets could work in yours. It's more important to have people on the case who can be interrogative, incisive and facilitate rapid progress to a smart result. And choose people you get on with as it's likely there'll be difficult conversations along the way.

7. How many pitches should I invite?

Ideally none, there is too little time. Research brand consultancies on the web, look at their approach, their work portfolio and where possible ask the clients, whose brands or campaigns you like, about their experience of working with the agency. If you do have two or three promising options, then ask the actual people with who you would be working to come in for a chat and an outline brief, ask them how they would approach the job and follow up by asking your preferred agency to submit a written and priced proposal. Lastly, give them an idea of budget – otherwise you could end up with a mismatch of scale that doesn't do anybody any favours.

8. Should I be asking creative pitches?

No. Any branding agency worth its salt needs to interrogate the business strategy, target markets and sales & marketing plans before it begins to develop brand positioning, identities, campaigns or web sites. Asking for creative ideas before their analysis is completed is premature and means the agencies haven't got a clear creative brief built on business foundations. You are left with a subjective choice that is far from ideal

9. How can we get better value from an agency?

It's a good time to review who you are working with and the way you work with them. Examine which parts of the relationship are necessary and valuable against those which could be obstacles to moving forward in a quick, lean and effective manner. If you are working with a large agency, it's important that you understand how much of the fees you pay support account management and if that layer of overhead is really worth the spend. It could be preventing you from direct communications with the consultants and creatives who could benefit enormously from the subtle elements in your conversations that an account manager missed.

10. What can we do to help create a better brand and campaign?

The people that hold the business strategy hold the key to the brand positioning and involving a small team of senior managers with authority early on and throughout the process will help the process move faster in the correct direction. Many projects have been delayed and faltered when the middle management all agree on a direction only to be rejected by the senior managers at what was intended to be a 'rubber stamp' meeting. If the two level project is the only way to handle it, involve the agency in the presentation for final approval.

[Continued ...](#)



Summary

- 1.** A recession is a time to strengthen your branding to ensure that you stand out, make a clear offer and customers understand why they should engage with you.
- 2.** A strategic brand review will result in your people and your communications delivering consistent messages to your audiences.
- 3.** Investment in marketing during a downturn is the behavior of winning brands and an opportunity to take business from those who do not.
- 4.** Use a practically minded, experienced consultancy to help you move quickly through a strategic brand review and into implementation. An external view is very helpful at this time.
- 5.** Retain consultants who are experienced and not afraid to express their opinions and tackle the real issues. It may not always be what you want to hear.
- 6.** Don't automatically go to the 'industry standard' consultants. You need to challenge the norm and be different from the pack.
- 7.** Assess consultants on how they ask questions, complement your team's abilities and how well you get on with them as people.
- 8.** Avoid creative pitches – consultants can only come up with a good answer after they have interrogated the business in the early part of the project.
- 9.** Choose an agency that doesn't put costly layers of account handling between you and the people who actually do the work.
- 10.** Involve senior management decision makers in the brand strategy project from the beginning. You will make faster progress in the right direction.