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Brand plan—it's more than jingles

“Your premium brand had better be delivering something special, or it's not going to get the business.” —Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway

While I love visiting local coffee shops across Nebraska, I have to admit that I purchase name brand coffees when brewing at home or in the office. I've tried lesser known brands, but in the end it seems that I am pre-disposed to spending the extra money to pick up a package of Folgers or Starbucks. It would be pretty simple if I could say that it was simply a case of a few bad experiences with the lesser known brands... but, it's just not that simple.

As I brew a cup of Folgers coffee, and that smell of freshly brewed coffee hits my olfactory senses, something triggers that all too familiar jingle in my head “The best part of waking up, is Folgers in your cup.” If you're like me, there is something comforting in taking a sip of something that has been familiar for such a long time.

As an individual that shares responsibility for your company's success, you can take comfort as well in the fact that brands can provoke such a powerful response. According to Marsha Yeagley, Coordinator of College Communications at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, “As consumers of physical products or services, one may be comforted with the familiarity of a chosen, long-term, reliable brand.” The question you have to ask yourself is, “How can I get my clients to sing my company's metaphorical jingle?”

Why Worry About Branding in the Government Market

A strong brand is important when selling to consumers, but you might wonder why a company would worry about branding when selling in the government market. That's an excellent question, and there is an excellent answer — FAR Part 10.¹

The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) guides purchasing within the federal government, and is codified at Title 48, Chapter 1 of the United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). FAR Part 10 sets forth requirements that Contracting Officers and federal purchasing agents must conduct market research before releasing solicitations or making purchases. The level and type of market research is determined by the circumstances of the purchase, but the key is that government purchasing agents will research companies that sell the products and/or services that their agency needs.

Therein lies the opportunity. As a company with interest in selling to government agencies, you need to ensure that you create visibility for your company — and you want to make sure that it's the right type of visibility. How can you develop a brand that is vis-

ible and attractive to government purchasing agents? Before we examine some steps you can take, let's consider what things you should consider in developing your brand.

What Makes Up a Company's Brand

There is a good reason why experts have differing opinions on what makes up a company's brand — it may not be the same for every company, industry, or environment. According to Yeagley, "Branding can be a valuable asset of an organization when done well. A brand should mean something, quality, value, dependability, innovativeness, or perhaps prestige."

Brands emanate from everything the company does. The brand should be about who you are and what you do.

A *Business Journal* article by John Timmerman and Stephen Shields states, "Making and keeping a brand promise is a complex activity... (that) takes a deep understanding of the impact of emotion on customers... and aligning important organizational elements

to deliver the brand promise, including customer knowledge, strategy, process design, human capital, measurement, and leadership."²

That sounds complex — and it is, but don't pass up the opportunity to improve your company's standing by developing a stronger branding. Companies that develop strong brands focus time and effort into ensuring that they get it right as they define and develop their brand.

Start simple, and don't try to tackle your company's branding in one sitting. Before you get started, it might be beneficial to look around for good examples of branding, and think about what makes that company's brand so attractive. From the eastern edge of Nebraska to the western edge, it's easy to find some very recognizable companies — Berkshire Hathaway, ConAgra Foods, Gallup, Mutual of Omaha, Hornady Manufactur-

ing, The Buckle, Baldwin Filters, Union Pacific, Cabela's, etc.

The examples above reflect very different industries, product lines, and company environments. For that reason, you may or may not recognize an individual company's logo, tagline, or other elements of its branding. For instance, most people would immediately recognize Union Pacific's logo, but will they know anything more about that company's branding?

To look at another example, Cabela's also has an easily recognized logo — the company's name in script. Because they market to consumers, however, you may identify more of their branding elements thanks to their retail locations and "It's In Your Nature" advertising campaign.

While most people have heard of ConAgra Foods, the majority probably couldn't describe the company's logo. That doesn't mean that ConAgra has not created strong branding. While you may not recognize the corporate branding of ConAgra, you will likely recognize the branding of many of their top products. According to ConAgra's website, their products "can be found in 99% of America's households."³ These products lines include brands such as: Hunt's ketchup, Swiss Miss hot cocoa, Chef Boyardee ravioli, Healthy Choice meals, etc. How strong would you say the branding is behind ConAgra?

While company branding may "look" different, companies start creating their brand from within.

While it's helpful to look around at other companies for examples, it is absolutely critical that you create "your brand" rather than someone else's. Do you have a vision statement or a mission statement? How about core values?

Branding is more than creating a logo or slapping a

Make the investment in your company to establish a vision statement, mission statement, and core values — they will guide your decision making and strengthen your company for the long-term

fancy label on a package — according to Howard Shultz, the founder of Starbucks, “(brands) emanate from everything the company does.”⁴ The brand should be about who you are and what you do. Make the investment in your company to establish a vision statement, mission statement, and core values — they will guide your decision making and strengthen your company for the long-term.

Improve Your Company’s Standing by Developing a Stronger Branding

While some of the clients I work with have dedicated staff and marketing budgets, I also work with companies that do not. That doesn’t mean that all is lost — it just means that the challenges and opportunities may be different for those companies.

There are ways that companies can improve their marketing in the government market with limited staff and resources. Let’s take a look at the things that impact your company’s visibility to government agencies.

If a company is interested in the federal market, I like to start with the SAM (System for Award Management) registration. Without an active SAM registration, your opportunities to sell to federal agencies is severely limited. While much of the SAM registration is about entering company data and completing representations/certifications, you should remember that it really is a visible representation of your company. Misspelled words, inconsistent formatting, and missing or incorrect information can make a strong impression with a Contracting Officer.

While completing the SAM registration, you will have an opportunity to create an SBA profile to be included in the Dynamic Small Business Search (DSBS) database. The DSBS database is maintained by the Small Business Administration as a tool for Contracting Officers and purchasing agents to complete market research. The DSBS database is also used by commercial businesses to identify potential subcontractors or teaming partners. The SBA profile gives you an opportunity to share key information about your company that is not included in SAM — a short capabilities narrative, special equipment/materials, performance history (references), quality assurance standards, etc. To improve your visibility with

federal agencies, it is important to spend the extra time to complete the SBA profile well.

Even without a dedicated marketing staff and budget, a company can improve its visibility to government agencies.

Capability statements are also helpful in marketing to government agencies. Essentially, the capability statement is a one to two page company resume that includes five key categories — Company Data, Core Competencies, Differentiators, Past Performance, and Pertinent Codes. If your

company already has marketing materials, it may not be necessary to start from scratch. Take a look at what you already have, and see if it can be easily turned into a capability statement or if you can at least use some of the elements to help create a capability statement. I recommend that companies have the capability statement in a format that can easily be changed or updated — as the capability statement should be a living document. Being able to easily update the capability statement will allow you to customize the document to specific agencies and add new past performance information, etc. as needed.

In general, you will also want to take a look at your other marketing materials to make sure that your brand is expressed throughout... and that all elements are in sync.

What is your email address? Obviously, you want it to present a professional image. The trend is for companies to have a domain name, rather than having a “free” generic account like yahoo or gmail. According to a study from Microsoft Research, a domain name can help create the image that a company is “credible.”⁵

How is your website set up? You want to make sure that your website is visibly appealing and easy to navigate. It should be a visible representation of your brand — who you are, what you do. Many companies share their vision or mission statements, their core values, etc. I suggest that you also keep your capability statement in mind. Some businesses incorporate information from their capability statements throughout their website,

while others will have a “government” tab that will present this information or include a link to their capability statement. If you don’t have a website developed, it could be beneficial to develop one. Market research is not limited to the Dynamic Small Business Search and capability statements, Contracting Officers and purchasing agents will visit company websites to learn more about those companies.

What do your business cards, flyers, cups, pens, etc. look like? There are rules about gratuities to government officials, and you want to make sure that you follow those rules by not giving items of value to government employees. However, you will likely share your business card with a government official at some point, and you want to make sure that your marketing materials (including your business cards) reflect your brand. Make sure that you include pertinent information on your marketing materials — a business card with no address will likely trigger a red flag with a government purchasing agent.

One thing that government purchasing agents assess in their market research is the level of risk in doing

business with companies that they are researching. By nature, these government purchasing agents are risk averse. Creating a strong brand can help mitigate a sense of risk. According to Yeagley, “The recognition of a brand can make one feel they are avoiding risk by engaging in business with a known entity. The value of the brand equity can be significant. Consequently, the respected name, logo, or image needs to be protected.”

Help Is Here

While your local PTAC Consultant won’t be able to “create your brand,” we can assist you with completing registrations and developing strategies to market to government agencies. The purpose of the Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) Program is to help local economies by assisting companies in doing business with federal, state, or local government agencies. In Nebraska, the PTAC Program is operated by the Nebraska Business Development Center. To contact your local PTAC Consultant for assistance, you can visit our website at: nbdc.unomaha.edu/government-contracting.

¹ <https://www.acquisition.gov/sites/default/files/current/far/html/FARTOCP10.html>

² <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/164045/brand-company-engine.aspx>

³ <http://www.conagrafoods.com/>

⁴ Howard Schultz, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*

⁵ <http://searchengineland.com/microsoft-research-searchers-really-do-favor-some-domains-over-others-104560>



About the author

Chuck Beck, FCC, CVC is a government contracting consultant for the Nebraska Business Development Center. He has completed Level I and Level II of the Federal Contractor Certification (FCC) from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Beck is a member of the Association of Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (APTAC), and serves as a Certified Verification Counselor. He earned his Bachelor's Degree at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and serves the Central and Western Nebraska areas in his role as a PTAC Consultant.



About the Nebraska Business Development Center

NBDC is a cooperative program of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). NBDC partners with the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Southeast Community College, Wayne State College, Mid-Plains Community College and Chadron State College to provide consulting and business support services from offices in Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney, Grand Island, North Platte, Wayne, Auburn, Scottsbluff and Chadron. Learn more about NBDC at nbdc.unomaha.edu

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