

5 Key Lessons I Learned From Working at AOL About Creating a Brand for Your Business

By Mary Foley

After 10 years of forging my career at AOL during their rise to global dominance, I consider myself corrupted. The lessons I learned there are seared onto my brain. And, thankfully so, because I've used everything single one in building my own business.

One huge lesson I learned was about branding. By 1997, AOL was the number one online service, but the lead wasn't so huge that Microsoft's new MSN service couldn't take it away. If AOL was going to continue to bust open and take a huge lead, we needed to do something a bit different. Enter COO Bob Pittman. His first, foremost, and I believe, most valuable, thing he ever did was to insist that the company get serious about creating a brand. Not simply a well-known company, not a recognized logo, but a brand, something that evokes a strong emotion, that's incredibly attractive, and that people want to stay attached to.

We started to get deliberate about creating a brand. Everything we did – from look and feel to marketing to customer service to pricing to online content and more – communicated several tenants of the AOL brand: easy, affordable, and useful. It worked. By the year 2000, AOL was a \$7 billion dollar company with 23 million members and a wide lead in the top spot.

When I left AOL and started Bodacious! Ventures, I took everything I learned about branding and applied it to my new business. Here are five key lessons about creating a brand that you can use for your own business:

1. **Every company has a brand. The question is, “Is it working for you?”**
Creating a brand isn't just for the big companies; it's for companies of all sizes. We're all fighting for attention from our target customers. If you don't create a brand, then you risk not being remembered and not being emotionally attractive. Both are a prerequisite for sales.

Ask Yourself: What is my brand? Is it working for me? Am I willing to make changes if needed?
2. **Your brand must evoke a strong emotion.** Neurologist Donald Calne said, “The essential difference between emotions and reason is that EMOTION leads to ACTION while reason leads to conclusions.” Customers buy from emotion and back it up with their head.

Ask Yourself: What emotion does my brand evokes? Do I know how others experience my brand? (Psst! Ask at least 10 people.) Is that the emotion I want my brand to evoke?

3. **Your brand isn't a logo. It's everything you offer, say, and do.** A brand is an experience with many facets. There are a ton of ways a person can interact with you and your company, for example, marketing materials, business card, website, personal appearance, quality of your product or service, how someone answers the phone, voice mail message, e-mail, and customer support.

Ask Yourself: What are all the ways a person can interact with my company or brand? (Psst! Make a list.) Is each interaction supporting or derailing the emotional experience I want my brand to create?

4. **As a one woman show, YOU are your brand!** 87% of all women owned businesses have one employee – the woman herself. Who you are and what you do affects everything about your business.

Ask Yourself: What about my brand is “just like me”? Do I support my brand experience in how I dress, speak, and interact with others?

5. **Your brand needs constant tweaking.** You have to start somewhere. So, you launch your company and brand, see what works, and you keep adjusting. What ultimately matters is what the customer thinks and feels.

Ask Yourself: Have I given much thought lately about the brand experience I'm creating for my customers? What's one thing I've heard again and again from customers that I need to change about my business?

About Mary Foley

During a successful, demanding, rising through the ranks 10 year career with America Online Mary learned that the only way to thrive in today's world is to be bold, positive, and courageous – bodacious! Today she inspires women to be bodacious in life, career and business. On January 26 – 27th, Mary and 23-year marketing guru Cheryl Thompson will host the 2007 Branding & Marketing Success Summit for Women Entrepreneurs in Richmond, VA! Register by December 31st for only \$199! Go now to www.BusinessSuccessForHer.com.