

Fifteen years can mean a lot of changes for an engineering firm.

For Omaha, Nebraska-based HDR, Inc., it meant growing from 6,236 employees in 145 offices a decade ago to 10,000 employees in more than 225 global locations today. It also meant making strategic decisions to drive that growth including repurchasing all company stock to become employee owned, expanding into new services, reorganizing engineering and architecture into regional formats, acquiring five companies, opening a Shanghai, China, office and transitioning to new leadership.

And three years ago, it meant reassessing the firm's brand by asking one simple question: Does our brand match who we are after all these changes?

"Things change a lot in our industry, and we've always been able to adapt by moving to where that change occurs," says Rex Fisher, senior vice president corporate relations for HDR. As the company

reaches its 100th anniversary in 2017, the firm began a one-year journey to refresh its brand, starting with a logo update and eventually moving to more complex tasks—client interviews, employee focus groups, new messaging and storytelling ads. Most important, HDR has instituted an ongoing training program with employees to make sure every employee understands and consistently delivers the company's new messaging.

"It doesn't happen overnight," Fisher says. "You have to spend a lot of time driving it deep into your organization at all levels."

Some of the common reasons for rebranding include a change of leadership, a merger or acquisition or when firms want to reposition themselves in the marketplace, according to Karl Feldman, account director at Hinge Branding and Marketing for Professional Services.

Even small brand changes can accumulate and ultimately affect your audience

over time. Regardless of the size and scope of your firm, it's critical that you're conscious of your brand, the message it's relaying and its impact on the marketplace.

MORE THAN A LOGO

"Your brand is not your logo or your colors," says Jen Newman, CEO of Ignite Coaching & Consulting, LLC. "Your brand is the feeling that people have when they hear your name. It's what people say about you when you're not in the room, and it's not determined by you."

The first step in learning what others think about your firm is to ask them. Waltham, Massachusetts-based Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, Inc. (SGH) has gone through two big brand efforts. The first in 2007 was a corporate rebranding program while the second involved a new online brand strategy in 2015.

In 2007, SGH enlisted a brand consultant who led the company through the internal process of asking principals and

BRAND

Whether keeping pace with company growth or anticipating a resurging market, don't overlook the importance of your company's brand



executives, “Who do we think we are?”

Next, SGH took that same question on the road to ask clients what they thought the firm represented.

“The circles overlapped somewhat,” says Jason Heroux, vice president of business development for SGH. “We were focused on what we bring technically and clients agreed, but technical acumen is expected from every firm. The things they thought differentiated us were our commitment to them and making sure a project gets done right, whether it was directly our responsibility or not—and our deep bench of various engineering capabilities.”

From there, the company was able to identify its market differentiator and a plan of action.

WHAT MAKES YOUR FIRM DIFFERENT?

“The more clear and specific you can be in how you talk about your brand, the

greater the momentum a company can create in the marketplace,” Feldman says. “People will know exactly how you fit.”

Prosaic statements such as “we’re local to the clients we serve” or “we have great people,” won’t do, Newman says. Instead, try another strategy. “What is your concierge client service?” Newman says. “What services do you offer that stand above the rest? It could be ‘we solve problems before the clients even think about them’ because we know them so well. Sometimes it’s as simple as ‘we’re responsive, and we’ll get back to you within 24 hours.’ It might be simple, but many firms don’t have that culture and that matters to your clients.”

Once the firm’s message and differentiator has been uncovered, the company must develop a course of action to spread the word. Often, two plans are required: one for internal communication and one in the marketplace through advertising,



“You have to spend a lot of time driving it [brand awareness] deep into your organization at all levels.”

REX FISHER | HDR

public relations and industry events.

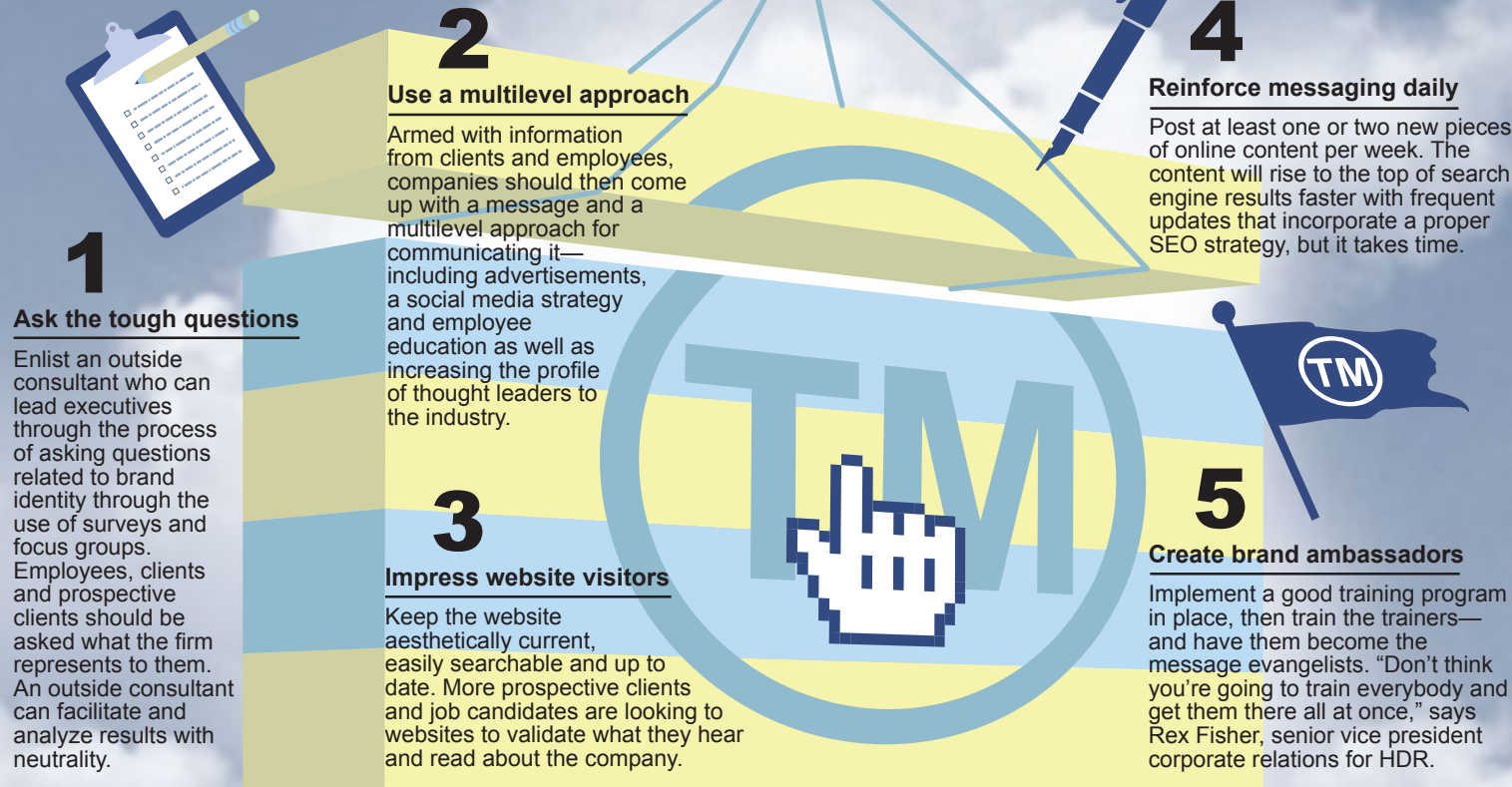
Years ago, firms would place an ad in a magazine with a clever headline and photos of a project. That’s no longer the case. “Now, people are looking for credibility in venues such as speakers at conferences,



BY STACY COLLETT

UPPERCUT IMAGES / GETTY IMAGES

Five Key Points to Building Your Brand



those talking about the latest trends, techniques or regulations. Or it’s being quoted in articles or producing content that’s not sales material,” says Feldman.



“It is amazing how recognizable your brand becomes when you are embedded in the community.”

**RENEE LANE
C&S COS.**

Furthermore, brand strength in professional services is measured by reputation and visibility. “You can’t see your reputation, but you can build up brand strength and visibility by sharing your knowledge in a thought leadership capacity, so you can develop trust,” Feldman says.

BATTLE OF THE BRANDS

So how would you approach trying to sell into a market where there already exist dominant players providing similar services as you? Mike McDermott, president of Bash Foo, an inbound marketing agency, says marketing teams are often faced with this branding challenge.

“When Lyft entered the scene, their competitor Uber already had a dominant market position,” McDermott says. “However, while Uber spent their time and coin battling in the headlines with taxi drivers, Lyft quietly grew as the

reliable alternative to the embattled ‘black car’ service.

“With bright pink logos, themed rides, and Lyft riders being encouraged to sit in the front seat, Lyft provides the same exact service of getting their customer to where they want to go. They simply chose to not be so stuffy and uptight about the ride experience,” he said.

Lyft still has to be careful with their branding decision. Things like low cost, an easy to use mobile app, a stable of good drivers and reliability of service are marks that Lyft must continue to hit.

McDermott recalled how similarly, Southwest Airlines knew that to compete in the cut-throat airline markets they’d have to do some pretty drastic things to get recognized and still stay profitable.

“You’ve probably heard of, or experienced, the inflight shenanigans of the Southwest flight crew. This choice to be the ‘entertaining’ one of the bunch, along with its desire to operate out of smaller airports within hub cities across the U.S. proved to be the winning cocktail for them over the past 35 years,” he said.

McDermott summarized, “in both of these examples, the companies chose to dive into these competitive markets with an understanding that at the core, they had to differentiate within an established product or service and make that differentiation inextricably bound to their brand.”

WEBSITE, SOCIAL MEDIA IMPORTANCE

Websites have become the information hub of a company’s brand. Prospective clients and job candidates go to a company’s website to verify what was said in an interview or in a project proposal. “If they can’t find it on your website, they immediately question what you’re saying about yourself,” Heroux says.

“Your website is an opportunity for you to design someone’s

first impression of you,” says Sarah Walpert, chief marketing officer for the brand consulting firm Ingenium. “It gives you the opportunity to tell them exactly what you want them to know, such as who you are, what you’re good at, why it’s great to work with you and the projects you’ve worked on,” she says.

A sleek website and a social media presence are also essential for attracting young talent, especially millennials and Gen X workers who do the majority of their job searching online, Walpert adds. “It’s the impression they get of a company when they go to their website, look up the owner on LinkedIn or encounter a company’s brand presence at a conference that attracts them to the firm,” she says.

A multilevel-branding approach also includes content marketing and a social media presence that enforces the company’s brand. The latest rebrand to the SGH website includes a regular cadence of new content that’s specific to the firm’s message. The website also allows visitors to sort through information quickly to find content that matches their interests.

“We’re putting content on our website and distributing through one of our social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, at least once a day and sometimes multiple times a day,” Heroux says.

The type of content posted—and its value to readers—matters a great deal. The firm updated its website by including news about successful projects, posting thought leadership papers and topic briefs that may have already been written for other purposes as well as publicizing the educational seminars it hosts. Additionally, SGH introduced video content, which brought even more traction to its website. “We’re getting thousands and thousands of views on projects that prior to the new website launch would not have been that widely viewed,” Heroux says.

Adding regular content integrated with an effective search engine optimization (SEO) plan also moves a firm’s name up higher in a browser search. The key is doing proper SEO research on keywords and topics that match a firm’s expertise, and then posting with both frequency and depth on those topics.

“There are still a fair number of firms that think of their websites as a brochure, and then they’ll say they’re not showing up on searches,” Feldman says. “It’s a natural consequence of not adding a lot of content. The search engines have



“We’re putting content on our website and distributing through one of our social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, at least once a day and sometimes multiple times a day.”

JASON HEROUX
SIMPSON GUMPERTZ &
HEGER, INC.

algorithms and will respond to those changes, but it takes time.”

How often should content be updated? There are a lot of variables, including resources and capacity, but a general rule of thumb is at least one or two new pieces of content a week. Most important, it must cover topics that are important to the firm’s target audience.

“If they’re blogging about trivial stuff or the firm’s latest anniversary, that’s not going to help,” Feldman says.

SGH has set a lofty goal for its online content. “We’re trying to capture 10 to 15 percent of our project work and as much as possible of our professional work, so that in 10 years we will have several thousand project and professional content pieces on our website,” Heroux says. “Then we expect to have improved search rankings on Google and very few holes when someone drills down and tries to find something on a very specific topic.”

To accomplish this objective, the firm has hired two full-time marketing writers who draft content pieces that are then edited by technical leaders to ensure accuracy.

EMPLOYEES AS BRAND AMBASSADORS

“Developing the brand doesn’t end with the project launch. It’s a continuous process of educating employees and reinforcing the message every day,” says Therese Nuckolls, global brand director for HDR.

To kick things off, HDR developed online training modules that explain to employees what the brand represents, how it should be communicated and what it means to their relationships with clients. All employees were required to take the course, which takes 90 minutes to two hours to complete, and it’s now mandatory for all new employees.

“We knew the rebrand would only be successful if employees actually believed in the brand,” Nuckolls says. “Employees are our brand ambassadors. Make sure they’re selling the company consistently with that new messaging.”

Brand ambassadors can represent the firm in many ways, including philanthropy.

“Our method is very sincere and simple. We give back to the very communities where we live and work by volunteering, donating and similar philanthropy,” says Renee Lane, director of PR and corporate communications for the engineering firm C&S Cos. in Syracuse, New York. “This promotes a tremendous amount of goodwill in the community and is also great for internal staff morale. It is amazing how recognizable your brand becomes when you are embedded in the community. It works at all levels, and it feels good, too.”

Lane adds that it’s difficult to measure the success of volunteerism and its effect on the brand. “But it is safe to say, our communities and clients certainly know who we are and all that we do for the communities,” she says.

Marketing and branding experts agree that rebranding a company takes time, but the benefits can last for years.

“A campaign or a tagline can change, but a brand is who you are, and that doesn’t change,” Nuckolls says. “While the look of our new brand might be contemporary, what we stand for is still exactly the same as it was 100 years ago.” ■

Stacy Collett is a business and technology writer based in Chicago.