

## Building Your Image

Written by Steve Marr  
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Bill and Becky operated a bakery and sandwich shop called Wholegrain Bakery. Customers lined up early each morning to purchase bagels, muffins, croissants, bread, and other goodies, but the bakery's highly profitable specialty items outstanding cakes and desserts didn't sell very well.

Although they produced great products, Bill and Becky neglected to build the bakery's image around their premium, high-quality items. Casual customers perceived the shop as an average bakery rather than as a purveyor of top-flight desserts. Why?

First, the owners presented their company as an old-fashioned corner bakery. Their window displays and signage were neat but simple, not conveying an upscale image. Inside, the counters and display cases were filled with an abundance of baked goods, but the high-end desserts were jammed in alongside the breads and rolls. A sign listing the daily specials was handwritten. The staff were neatly dressed but without a uniform appearance.

"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart?" (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV). Unfortunately, if the outward appearance of a business doesn't clearly communicate a company's unique strengths, customers may not understand everything the company has to offer. Bill and Becky did a good job of merchandising their everyday items, but they failed to capitalize on the potential of their high-margin desserts.

The first step in building your company's image is to clearly understand your key competitive advantage in the marketplace, and then to craft your image around that advantage. For example, Wholegrain Bakery had several competitors for bagels and bread, but these other shops couldn't match the bakery's array of high-quality dessert items.

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When Bill and Becky invested in an image makeover, they began to concentrate on merchandising their upscale dessert items, while still maintaining their inventory of basic baked goods. First, they repainted the exterior of the building and added new signs that replaced the corner bakery image with a more upscale, high-quality feel. Next, they replaced the old tables and chairs with some sharp-looking new furniture. They then rearranged the display cases to more effectively showcase the desserts. To create room, they kept all the extra bread, rolls, and bagels in the back until needed. The result was a sharp increase in the sale of desserts!

Creating an image for your company is only the first step, however; you must also support and maintain your image through your actions. Here is a key equation to keep in mind: Customer expectations minus the reality they experience equals customer disappointment. Make sure that the image you present to your customers is accurate. When I was shopping for window blinds recently, I was drawn to a local store that advertised, We beat all prices by 20 percent. However, the quote I received from this company was the same as from other stores. As a result, the discount store lost all credibility with me. Once you have determined what your image should be, you must strive to deliver that image to your customers. Heed the wise words of King Solomon, who wrote, Put away from you a deceitful mouth? (Proverbs 4:24, NASB).

Upscale isn't necessarily the best image for every business. The point is to make sure that your image accurately reflects your company's unique strengths. For example, a nearby vacuum repair business that offers great repair service and used vacuums operates out of a small shop cluttered with merchandise, and customers can see the repair staff fixing machines. This folksy setup conveys the company's signature strengths: reliable repair service and low-cost vacuums. Or consider Sam's Club and Costco: Their concrete floors and merchandise piled high to the ceiling reinforces the idea that you are getting warehouse-style bargains.

Some business owners mistakenly believe that advertising creates their company's image. Instead, I believe that a company's advertising should highlight the image the owners have defined for their business and what they deliver to their customers.

Take a step back. Determine your company's key advantage in the marketplace. Then determine whether your current image fits that advantage. Are you effectively highlighting your key benefits? If not, identify three steps you can take to hit the mark. If you determine that your operation is out of step with your image, make the commitment to either align your image with

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your operation, or make changes in your operation to match your image.

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