

Great design is now table stakes; where does branding go next?

A well-designed brand identity is no longer a nice to have, but a fundamental for any new business. Every entrepreneur knows that while product matters, design sells.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Ten to fifteen years ago, a slickly designed brand may well have been enough to cut through. But now – and you might be surprised to hear a brand design studio say this – looking good is now table stakes.

Walk into a grocery store in 2024 and every brand from legacy icons to shelf newcomers are vying for attention with sleek, modern designs and vibrant colours. It's clear that aesthetics alone are no longer enough to capture the hearts and minds of consumers.

In a world where new brands emerge every minute (5.5 million new businesses started in 2023 alone) and quality design for products and services has become far more accessible, it's harder than ever to differentiate. With competition fierce for entrants in every category, and ongoing economic instability, branding needs to do much more than turn heads to secure lasting success.

Design x brand - what's the difference?

Design is for communication, but *brands are for belonging*. Today's consumers are looking beyond product, pricing and customer service when it comes to their purchasing decisions. People don't fall in love with ingredients or product features alone. They are seeking innovative

experiences beyond the shelf or checkout, values that align with their personal beliefs, and opportunities to foster a sense of community with like-minded individuals.

Founders need to recognise this fundamental change in what people expect from the brands they choose, and shift their focus from mere product-focused transactions to building meaningful relationships that add value to their consumers' lives. This involves delving deeper into culture to understand people's aspirations as well as their concerns, and working out how their brand can fulfill an unmet need.

In a world that doesn't need more stuff, some of the most successful startups are emerging as powerful agents of change. It's not just innovation and disruption that sets these new businesses apart; it's their commitment to a higher purpose. From Liquid Death's drive to "unf**k the planet" to Duolingo's Tik Tok mascot making language learning available to all, these companies are transforming the way we think about entrepreneurship, success, and the very nature of business. And they're doing it through evolved brand building aligned to their business objectives.

Here are tips from startups that have leveraged brand beyond design to achieve unicorn status:

Rally your brand around a cause that the world needs

Liquid Death's irreverent marketing and edgy aesthetic have garnered significant attention through its goth-rock package design but what I love about the brand is what it does beyond the shelf. The brand emphasises environmental sustainability by promoting the recyclability of aluminum cans through comedic videos, celebrity partnerships, plush toys and a whole ton of killer merchandise. People want to support brands that are

doing good for the planet, but that alone won't drive engagement or make people come back for more. They need to find ways to entertain and make us laugh while we murder plastic.

Use technology to make life easier for your customers

Established in 2007, Sweetgreen has emerged as a leader in the fast-casual dining scene, offering customisable salads and grain bowls made with fresh, seasonal ingredients sourced from local farms. The salads are great (kale caesar is my go-to) the design is beautiful, but it's their use of tech that pushes the brand forward in my eyes. Sweetgreen leverages technology to enhance the customer experience, offering online ordering and an amazing mobile app for convenient pickup and delivery options.

This integration of technology into the dining experience aligns with Sweetgreen's ethos of innovation and adaptability in meeting the evolving needs of its customers. No surprise it is constantly testing out new ways to make its customers happy from drive thru pick up, to their beautiful app, loyalty programs and automated product lines.

Prioritise message and extend it from product to marketing

SKIMS, the inclusive shapewear and loungewear brand founded by Kim Kardashian, is one of my favorite brands of 2024. It has quickly become an iconic brand (now worth \$4 billion) and a beacon for inclusivity in the fashion industry. With a mission to celebrate all body types and empower individuals to feel confident in their own skin, SKIMS offers a wide range of sizes and nude colour options designed to match a diverse array of skin tones.

By prioritising inclusivity in its product offerings and marketing campaigns, SKIMS has shattered traditional beauty standards and redefined what it means to feel comfortable and confident in one's body.

Craft a narrative around lifestyle

Outdoor lifestyle brand YETI goes beyond mere product promotion in its content strategy, offering a rich tapestry of stories, adventures, and inspiration for outdoor enthusiasts. Through captivating photography, engaging videos, and compelling narratives, YETI's content transports its audience into the heart of the wilderness, showcasing the rugged beauty of nature and the exhilarating experiences that await. Whether via tales of epic expeditions, interviews with adventurers, or tips for outdoor survival, YETI's content showcases its products but also cultivates a lifestyle centered around adventure, authenticity, and the pursuit of untamed experiences.

By accepting the inconvenient truth that today, no amount of R+D will guarantee customer loyalty, founders can start building a brand identity that stands for something bigger than their product. The power of early adopters is real; startups that align a community of proactive, united fans to their brand are far less vulnerable to threat.

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