

HOW TO GET AHEAD IN BRANDING

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Turn off your phone, think big, fulfil your promises and look after your people: succeeding in the world of branding is easy if you follow these simple rules, argues Nick Liddell



#1 Do what you say you will

Nobody will work with you unless they feel they can trust you. And nothing erodes trust quicker than failing to deliver on a promise. It's a boring place to start, but this means noting down every commitment you make, setting a deadline and then delivering to it. Unless you can master this basic rule, there is little point even reading what follows, because you'll be too busy looking for your next job.

#2 Don't box yourself in

Many people seem to think of themselves in either/or terms: analytical or creative; visual or verbal; left-brain or rightbrain; intuitive or judgemental; introvert or extrovert. Really great consultants are all of these. They are analytical and creative, capable of communicating through visuals as well as verbally. Unless you have a doctor's note that says otherwise, you're probably capable of whole brain thinking and feeling. Deciding that you're left-brain or right-brain is simply selling yourself short.

#3 You are what you eat

Moving seamlessly from numbers to ideas to words to images requires a balanced diet of material. If you struggle with numeracy, spend more time looking for stories in the profit & loss accounts of businesses you find interesting. If you don't feel comfortable with your level of visual literacy, read Paul Rand or Milton Glaser; read graphic novels. If you struggle to come up with ideas then visit museums and galleries. Open your eyes to the world around you. One of the great things about being a brand consultant is that we are constantly surrounded by relevant stimulus. And we travel frequently. We are never short of opportunities to appreciate the cultural, creative and commercial value that brands inspire.



#4 It's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission

An idea can only be considered great once it has succeeded. Until then, you'll find there are dozens of reasons why an idea might fail. And relatively few compelling reasons for why it might succeed. If you're smart and you have a solid basis for believing in what you're doing, then I'd suggest you go for it. If things don't go as planned then apologise without hesitation, without reserve and without complaint. Then review rules 11 and 8 in that order.

#5 There is such a thing as a bad idea

It's absurd to suggest otherwise. And it's your job to tell the difference between bad and good. So think deeply about this distinction and learn to critique your own work. Keep what works. Fix what's broken. Most people will be too polite to tell you the truth about your work, so don't rely on them to do so.

#6 Look after the talent

At some point in your career you may be given a team to manage. You'll be tempted to think that the members of your team work for you, but the opposite is true: you work for them. Your success will depend entirely on the extent to which they feel respected and inspired by you. You won't be able to progress in your career unless they can step up and fill the gap you leave behind. That's why it's important to recruit people you think are better than you and to do everything you can to hold on to them. Because trying to replace great people is one of the most soul-destroying, time-consuming and expensive jobs you will ever undertake. And if you're not a manager yet, enjoy the freedom while it lasts.

#7 Always ask what you could have done better

One of the things I love about brand consultancy is that you could work for a hundred years and still have plenty to learn. Fifteen years in to my career, I feel like I'm just getting started. Your ability to learn is directly proportional to the number of times you ask, "What could I have done better?" At first, people will laugh at you for repeating the question after every pitch, briefing, debrief, or seminar. But over time, they will begin to ask the same question themselves. It's not a sign of paranoia. It demonstrates that you've got the confidence to accept you're not perfect and the desire to improve.

#8 Worry about the big stuff first, then take care of the detail

Great brand strategy involves adopting a strong point of view about the future and how you intend to make it better. It should be expansive and imaginative. This is what motivates people to turn strategy into reality. But strategy isn't a purely intellectual exercise; it should also be practical. Grand visions don't count for anything if they can't be delivered profitably. A good brand strategist reconciles the big picture with the little picture. This also applies to the way you present your work: typos, pixelated images, poor alignment, missing page numbers and sloppy delivery can critically undermine the quality of your thinking in the eyes of your colleagues and your clients. Read your work before sharing it with others. Rehearse before you present.

#9 Take it personally

This is the advice my first boss ever gave to me: **you're going to spend most of your waking adult life at work; if you don't take it personally then you'll die a little every day.** He was right. If you love your job, you'll pour a lot of your heart and soul into it. It's absolutely right that you should take it personally. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't be able to critique your work or to receive criticism from others. You should be able to bask in the glory of a job well done. But you should also embrace the bitter sting of failure; it's what helps you grow up.

#10 Nobody dies

Sticking with the subject of failure, it's inevitable that at some point you're going to screw something up. Someone will shout at you. They might threaten to fire you and you might deserve it. But one of the many wonderful things about brand consultancy is that nobody dies. You'll find that few situations are beyond your ability to redeem. This also means that you don't have to feel guilty about switching off your phone for the weekend, during your summer holiday or on your daughter's birthday. It doesn't kill anybody in brand consultancy to take a break once in a while.

#11 Give people the opportunity to disappoint you

One of the benefits of switching off your phone while you're on holiday is that it gives the people you work with an opportunity to step-up in your absence. It's very possible they might screw things up. But it's also possible that they will positively surprise you. Brand consultants are supposed to be problem solvers. This is why one of the worst mistakes that managers can make is to try to fix everything for the people who work with them. One of my favourite line managers would respond to any request for help from his team with the same question, "Before I help you, can you tell me what steps you've taken to fix this problem yourself?" At first, I assumed he was lazy. Perhaps he was. But I quickly realised that I was capable of solving most of my problems without his help. This is the flipside of delegation, which is one of the hardest things we have to learn to do as we become more senior.

#12 Develop an allergy to compromise

We can't tell clients anything they don't already know about their business. The value we bring is in applying insight from one category to another. The sheer number of businesses, markets and industries consultants are exposed to gives us a fantastic opportunity to lend a breadth of perspective to a client's problem. We exist to challenge our clients to see things differently. This is the value we bring. It's (another) one of the reasons why being a brand consultant is so interesting. To quote the Financial Times, "In the ping pong [of discussion], you need the pong." We're not here to start arguments or fights, but we are here to help people go to places they wouldn't have reached on their own. Compromise is the enemy of challenge. Being open to criticism can improve your work immeasurably. Being open to compromise dilutes the quality of your ideas, devalues the quality of your work, and defeats the point of your chosen profession.

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