



The Power of Brand Identity

by Brett Hutchinson

Your brand identity is more than a combination of symbols and letters printed on stationary and placed on your products—it is a symbol that identifies who you really are—your *reputation*, your *results* and the *recognition* you have received.

When Commander Norrington pushes up the sleeve on John Smith’s shirt in the movie *The Pirates of the Caribbean* he uncovers two brand marks—a ‘p’-shaped scar left by the East India Trading Company’s hot-iron brand—and a tattoo of a sparrow just above it.

“Ah, the infamous Jack Sparrow,” intones the Commander knowingly.

“*Captain* Jack Sparrow,” retorts Jack, defending his reputation.

Jack’s brand works, just not the way he hopes. It reveals who he really is (a pirate) and what he is truly known for (flying the coop), but he is not recognized as the captain he wants to be. He cannot argue away the meaning of the East India Trading Company’s ‘p’-shaped pirate brand. And upon seeing it, Sparrow gets the recognition every pirate deserves—the Governor orders his execution. ‘John Smith’ has been unmasked as the pirate Jack Sparrow.

How’s your brand identity? When people see your brand what do they associate with it? Is it your unmasking, “Oh my, if it’s from them, I want nothing to do with it?” Or is it recognized for the good you do? Are people reminded of your credibility and want to read more, or are they incredulous and order your immediate execution in the form of tearing up your letter, deleting your e-mail or ignoring your appeal?

You can do a simple test to uncover your true brand identity by comparing the following:

1. What you say about yourself and your organization.
2. The results you get from the product or service you provide.
3. What others say about you and the product or service you provide.



If what you say about your organization can be proven by your performance and is verified by what others say about you, then your brand identity is true. If what you say about your organization *can't* be proven (“Where is your ship, captain?”), and people have something quite different to say about what you have accomplished, this will be your undoing. The second people pull up your sleeve, they will know who you really are: scallywag—pirate! You say you are a ‘leader’ in a given category—now prove it.

Once branded, it’s hard to remove the association of that mark. If your reputation is bad enough, the heat of recognition will create an emotional connection to your brand that is so strong that your potential client or customer will never come near you again when they see that mark. But if your reputation is solid—proven results, verified by those who should know, you may just have created a near indelible mark of favor upon what you do; a mark that will call people to action in support of your company or cause wherever they see it.

Either way, brand identity has power; power to benefit, or be the undoing of your next transaction.