

# Big Brand – Zero Bucks

Don't blame you if you think there aren't any more start-ups left -- but there are. Now, more than ever, you can establish the brand you've dreamed of. It's cheap. It's easy to harness communications channels. Consumers are keenly attentive to anything new.

Cheap? How can you establish a dream brand if you're not equipped with a wallet as heavy as Coca-Cola's and a communications network as expansive as AOL Time Warner's?

There are plenty of things you can do that don't cost a fortune. Too many people think the secret of success lies in the logo. It doesn't. Don't fly into a panic and spend your money on logos, letterheads, and beautiful brochures. You'll only please your printer. Most communications today are digital. If you must spend, spend on digital letterhead. It costs a fraction of what the "real stuff" costs and is just as impressive. Don't tie yourself up in knots developing that logo, either. Some of the most successful companies' logos are hardly logos at all. They merely spell out the entity's name and became powerful signatures for the brands with time - think Microsoft, Gap, Fox...

Instead of cash, invest financial and intellectual resources in your marketing plan. Develop a unique business concept that

makes sense from the beginning. My plumber managed to create an interesting concept around his business by teaming up with competitors. He knows how frustrating it is for customers to be unable to get hold of a plumber in an emergency. He developed a plumber portal that shares 15 plumbers' schedules. All these guys' customers now have online access to a backup plumber, recommended by their usual tradesperson. Did my plumber lose business? On the contrary, his own and his contacts' clientele grew, as word spread that the site was a resource for harassed householders needing plumbers, pronto.

Forget about testing your business concept on friends. Even if they can really offer insight, their acumen will be compromised by a desire to protect and be polite to you. Instead, spend energy approaching people you don't know. People who couldn't care less about telling you your idea are no good. People who are your potential customers.

A marketing plan is essential to success. But eliminate any fantasies of full-page colour ads, TV spots, and radio commercials. You can't afford it. My advice varies depending on your industry. In general, I don't believe in traditional ads for start-ups, unless the company has something really interesting to offer.

Instead, optimise your ways of being found: sign up with the Yellow Pages a year in advance, if possible, so your business is visible the day it launches; optimise your site with all the search engines; make sure there's awareness abroad of your place in the scheme of things. You never know, a story might break in which your role and/or opinion might be relevant. Be discoverable by, accessible to, and familiar with journalists and the public before Day One. These steps are logical and much more critical for start-ups with no marketing budget than any expensive ad could be.

What works repeatedly is public relations and guerilla marketing. When, for example, most of Electric Artists' promotional work for Christina Aguilera was on the Web (in chat rooms, where new artists are talked up), buzz was created. According to Electric Artists, Internet communities are the best medium for spreading news and building buzz. Users and participants want to discover things on their own. They hate being over marketed to. Electric Artists started buzzing Christina Aguilera months before her first album went on sale. By the time her album hit stores, teenagers from



Seattle to Savannah were talking about her. She soared to number one. Electric Artists isn't a start-up, but what it did any start-up can do: stir up buzz.

Cost? Absolutely nothing.

The rules for starting a new business are simple. Don't spend all your time on the logo and don't spend all your money on expensive marketing. Consider alternatives. Start with a concept so brilliant your business can almost run without marketing. Optimise traffic as early in the process as possible. Then, begin the guerilla work. It's priceless yet nearly free. It will build your brand in a way no ad can, for a much more manageable price.

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