

ARTICLE 01

Branding Is Not What You Think It Is

Why the 5% that catches the eye depends on the 95% nobody sees

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October 2026 · 10-minute read

■ eikonbrand.com

01

The art-project trap

Ask most business leaders what their brand is, and they will point at something. The logo on the reception wall. The colour palette in the pitch deck. The website they paid a lot for last year.

None of that is wrong. It is just small.

For years I have watched the business world treat branding as an art project: a creative exercise you commission, approve and frame. The logic usually runs like this. Customers are not sticking, so the visuals must be tired. The company refreshes the logo, rebuilds the website, prints new business cards, and waits. Six months later nothing has moved, and someone concludes that branding does not work.

Branding worked fine. What failed was the definition.

The visual layer of a brand is real, and it matters. It is how people find you, recognise you and remember you. But it is the part of the iceberg above the waterline. It catches the eye. On its own, it does not command market share, set your price, keep your best staff or carry you through your first public mistake.

This article puts the whole iceberg on the table. I want to share the definition of branding I work from at Eikon Brand Strategists, the principle that shapes every engagement we take on, nine ideas about branding I think we should retire, and a simple test you can run on your own business before the week is out.

02

A working definition

This is the definition I have arrived at after many years in design, print and strategy, and the one I hold my own team to:

Branding is the relentless, consistent effort to ensure that you or your business is perceived exactly as you intend to be seen, most especially by the right people, by establishing an unshakeable, secure emotional connection.

Every phrase in that sentence is doing work. Remove any one of them and the whole thing collapses back into decoration.

1. Relentless, consistent effort. Branding is not a project with a launch date and a finish line. It is a daily discipline: the uncompromising execution of your standards at every point where someone meets you. If the consistency breaks, the perception breaks with it. A brand is not what you launch. It is the reputation you keep maintaining long after the launch party is over.

2. Perceived exactly as you intend. Perception left to chance is perception handed to your competitors, your critics or plain luck. Strong brands engineer it. That means taking control of the narrative, so that when your name comes up in a room you are not in, people reach for the value, authority and position you intended. You do not ask the market who you are. You tell it, and you keep telling it until it repeats you accurately.

3. Most especially by the right people. This is the phrase most brands skip. Trying to be everything to everyone is an expensive way to be nothing to anyone. Real strategy is precise. It filters out the noise of the mass market and concentrates on the specific, high-value audience that actually moves your vision forward. A brand loved by the wrong people and ignored by the right ones has failed, however many followers it has.

4. An unshakeable, secure emotional connection. This is the anchor. People do not buy on logic alone; they buy identity, trust and a feeling of safety. A powerful brand becomes a place where its audience feels understood and protected from a bad decision. When that connection is in place, resistance falls away, competitors start to look interchangeable, and clients become advocates who sell on your behalf.

Notice what is missing from the definition: the words logo, colour, font and website. They are not absent because they do not matter. They are absent because they are tools in service of the definition, not the definition itself.

03

The 95/5 principle

If I had to compress Eikon's philosophy into one idea, it would be this: the visual 5% attracts the eye, but the invisible 95% builds the equity and collects the money.

The 5% is everything people can see: the mark, the palette, the typography, the photography, the packaging. It is the doorway. It has to be excellent, because a doorway that looks cheap or careless tells people exactly what to expect inside.

The 95% is what I call the Underground Work. Like the foundation of a tall building, almost nobody sees it, and everything above ground depends on it. It includes:

- **Strategy:** who you serve, what you stand for, where you sit against competitors, and the one position you can genuinely own.
- **Systemic alignment:** making sure your pricing, service, hiring, premises and results all tell the same story as your visuals.

- **Narrative architecture:** the story you tell, the language you use and, more importantly, the story other people repeat about you when you are not in the room.
- **Governance:** the rules, guidelines and ownership that keep all of the above intact as more people start creating in your name.

Most agencies are paid for the 5%, because it is the part a client can hold at the end of an engagement. That creates a quiet but costly distortion. Clients receive a beautiful logo built on an unexamined guess, and when the business does not move, the logo takes the blame.

The 95/5 principle reverses the order of work. We do the Underground Work first and let the visual identity grow out of it. A mark built that way is not chosen because it looks nice on a mood board. It is chosen because it carries a strategy you can defend in one sentence.

Identity built without strategy is decoration. Identity built on strategy is armour.

04

Nine things branding is not

Earlier this year we published a short carousel titled “Branding is not what you think it is.” It deserves the long version. Here are nine common ideas about branding, why each one falls short, and what sits underneath it.

- 1. It is not marketing’s job.** You cannot delegate the soul of a business to a middle manager. Marketing communicates the brand; leadership owns it. When the CEO does not own the strategy, the brand begins to decay, slowly at first and then all at once. Branding is a leadership mandate.
- 2. It is not consistency.** Using the same font everywhere is just being tidy. Consistency is necessary, but the real standard is coherence: your price, your office, your service and your results all pointing at the same unmistakable truth. You can be perfectly consistent and still incoherent, with a luxury logo sitting on a budget experience.
- 3. It is not trust.** Trust looks backward at what you did. Branding looks forward. It is the expectation, the promise of what will happen next time. Trust is the evidence; the brand is the bet people place on your future behaviour.
- 4. It is not innovation.** You can invent the future, but if you cannot translate complexity into desire within seconds, your innovation will die in the lab. Branding is the translation of complexity into desire.
- 5. It is not storytelling.** Most brand stories are dull corporate histories: founded in, grew to, now serving. Real branding is closer to myth-making, and the hero of the myth is the customer. If the story is about you rather than the customer winning, nobody cares.

6. It is not a vibe. Vibes are for influencers. In high-stakes business, branding is risk mitigation. A strong brand assures the buyer that choosing you will not cost them money or status.

7. It is not being the best. “Best” is a trap. If a customer can compare you with a competitor on a spreadsheet, you have not branded; you have listed specifications. Real branding is being the only one.

8. It is not customer service. Being nice to people is the basic requirement for staying in business. Branding is the judgement a customer forms before they ever speak to your staff. If they walk in already expecting greatness, that is branding at work.

9. It is not awareness. Everyone knows what a mosquito is, and nobody wants one. Being known is cheap. Being wanted is branding. You can spend millions on billboards and still have a brand people actively avoid.

Read the nine together and a pattern appears. Each myth mistakes one visible output of a brand, such as a campaign, a font or a friendly receptionist, for the thing that produces it. The brand is the producer, not the product.

05

The visual battery

None of this means the visual 5% is cheap. Quite the opposite.

Large organisations routinely spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on an identity programme, sometimes well over half a million. The rest of the market looks at the finished mark and asks how a few lines could possibly cost that much.

The question misunderstands what a mature mark is. It is not a drawing. It is a battery.

Every late night, every kept promise, every satisfied client and every hard-won piece of trust is stored in that mark over time. When someone sees the Apple or Nike symbol, they are not reacting to lines on a screen. In a split second they are drawing down years of stored brand equity, everything they believe those companies stand for, released in a single glance.

That is why a cheap mark is so expensive. It has nowhere to store value. It carries no history, signals no standard, and gives your audience nothing to hold on to between interactions.

Two practical lessons follow.

First, stop pricing identity like a basic graphics job. An identity is the container for your reputation. Build it to the standard of the reputation you intend to earn, not the budget you had in your first month of trading.

Second, understand that the battery only charges through the 95%. A beautiful mark on an incoherent business stores nothing; it simply drains faster. What people pay for in a great identity is not in the file. It is in the years of aligned behaviour the file comes to represent.

I call this building the visual vault of your business: a mark designed to hold weight, protected by a system that keeps filling it.

06

The perception economy

We are no longer in a product economy. We are in a perception economy.

Products are copied faster than ever, features converge, and most customers cannot tell the technical difference between the top three options in a category. What they can tell is how each one makes them feel, what it says about them, and whether they trust it. The strongest brands do not just sell things. They create meaning, build trust and shape identity.

A simple frame helps:

- **Branding** is who you are.
- **Marketing** is how you communicate it.
- **Experience** is what people remember.

When those three disagree, people believe the experience every time.

Four forces build perception that lasts:

1. **Clarity beats noise.** If you cannot say clearly who you are, what you do and why it matters, your audience will not be able to say it for you.
2. **Coherence builds trust.** Trust is not claimed in a tagline. It is earned through repeated, aligned experiences over time.
3. **Emotion drives loyalty.** People do not connect with features. They connect with meaning, identity and belonging.
4. **Differentiation is survival.** If a customer could swap you for a competitor and nothing in their life would change, you are a commodity, and commodities compete on price.

Beneath all four sit a handful of deep human drivers that great brands speak to: the desire to belong, the need to stand out, the search for meaning and the pursuit of progress. When your brand reflects who people are, or who they want to become, loyalty stops being something you chase.

Positioning is where these forces meet. A winning position sits at the intersection of what people need, what competitors ignore and what you uniquely deliver. That intersection is where pricing power and growth live.

The last step is the move from audience to community. An audience listens. A community believes. Communities form around shared struggles, shared language and shared wins. Once your customers start telling your story for you, you have stopped paying for attention and started earning it.

07

The disappearance test

Here is the question I leave with every founder I work with: if your brand disappeared tomorrow, would anyone notice? Would anyone miss it?

Not your staff, and not your family. Your customers. The people you most want to serve.

If the honest answer is “probably not,” the problem is unlikely to be your logo. It is far more likely to sit in the 95%: an unclear position, a promise the experience does not keep, a story about you instead of your customer, or a brand that leadership has quietly handed over to the marketing team.

Three things you can do this week:

1. **Write your intended perception in one sentence.** How do you want the right people to describe you when you are not in the room? If five members of your leadership team write five different sentences, you have found your first problem.
2. **Run a coherence check.** Walk through your price, premises, website, sales conversation and after-sales service as a customer would. Note every moment that contradicts the sentence you just wrote.
3. **Name the right people.** Be specific about the audience whose perception matters most. Then ask honestly whether your current branding speaks to them, or to everyone.

People do not buy the best products. They buy the brands that feel most like them. The visual 5% earns you the glance. The Underground Work earns you the choice, the premium and the loyalty that follows.

That is what branding is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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