



tourism
northernireland

Building your brand



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What is a brand?

A brand is made up of all the associations, perceptions and expectations that people have about your offering.

These are based on people's direct experience with visiting or staying with you, or being exposed to your marketing materials such as a brochure or a website. It is also made up of people's indirect experience of you, including what people hear about you from others or read about you on social media or review websites.

The aim of a well-managed brand is to ensure that visitors' experience of your offering is a consistently positive one that encourages them to buy from you, recommend you and want to revisit you.

Why do I need a brand?

A brand helps you create a competitive identity for your business by defining what is distinctive and interesting about your offering. In short, it's a mechanism to drive customer demand, which leads to more sales.

How people feel about your brand matters. If those thoughts and feelings are positive, then your business will do well as people will be more likely to visit and tell others about you. However, if feelings and thoughts about your brand are negative, then your business will face challenges which will increase with time.

Branding is for everyone, regardless of your business' size or budget. Your brand is not just a logo, or a slogan, or a marketing campaign. It goes much deeper to reflect the essence and core characteristics of your business. It helps you understand the type of experience you should offer now and how your business should develop in the future. But that can only happen if you actively manage your brand. And that starts with defining it.

How do I define my brand?

Defining your brand is a journey of discovery and introspection, which includes confronting some home truths. You'll already have a sense of your brand just from thinking about it, however, ultimately your brand exists in the eyes of the beholder i.e. visitors. This is called **brand positioning**. This is the mental space you occupy in peoples' minds which is the sum of everything they know and feel about you. You can commission formal research into brand positioning, but you can also glean a lot from reviewing visitor feedback. This includes what people say to you directly or what they write on social media or review sites. This will give you a good sense of the positives and negatives that underpin your brand. There's a saying that the customer is always right. Well, lots of customers' views together are rarely wrong, because their perception of your brand is based on evidence.

Align your brand with visitor needs:

People choose places to visit for a variety of reasons. But increasingly, they are interested in experiential tourism. This is about connecting with people's feelings and emotions. While tourism businesses have always offered physical attributes, visitors are increasingly focused on satisfying their deeper emotional needs, such as their sense of adventure, need for escape, to emotionally recharge, seek authentic connection with a place or even each other. Increasingly visitors are looking for new sensations and unique experiences which deliver a sense of personal fulfilment. So, think about how your brand can deliver against these rich, deeper motivations. Remember, a visitor's experience should at very least match the expectations generated by the brand positioning statement otherwise they are likely to go online and share negative views.

To write a brand positioning statement, you must first answer these 4 questions:

- Who are my main customer segments?
- Have I conducted a SWOT analysis?
- What is distinct or unique about my brand?
- What sort of customer experience am I offering right now?

1. Who are my main customer segments?

It's impossible to appeal to everyone, so ask yourself, what type of customers do you or can you appeal to the most. This needs to be a large enough group to be viable and may involve a small number of different customer segments with similar needs or groups of like-minded customers. The best way to tap into consumers' need states is to see things from their perspective. Think about groups as a mix of demographic, circumstantial and psychographic characteristics. Try to be as descriptive as you can. So instead of appealing to 'young men' if you have an adventure tourism experience, maybe the target is better described as 'thrill seeking young professionals seeking bonding experiences'. If you offer self-catering accommodation that seems to appeal to families, maybe your target is 'value seeking parents wanting to create lifelong memories'.

There's no right or wrong answer, but try to describe your target audience in as rich detail as you can to understand how your offering can deliver against their needs.

Value seeking parents wanting to create lifelong memories

Lifestyle:

Living in Dublin – he's working full time.
She is part time. Big commutes each day.
Kids at school – so can't take them out of term.
Into food – it's a big part of a holiday.
Kids rule the roost – holidays must have things for them to do.
Look for value but still want good quality.

Holiday Needs:

Want children to have fond childhood memories.
Need to reconnect with each other as a couple – as the routine is mostly about work and the kids.
He wants to get to know the kids better.
Both adult time and kiddie time needed.
Money's tight but see holiday as essential.

Messages to emphasise:

Unique shared family experiences at the venue.
Testimonials of other families who have stayed.
More family experiences located nearby.
On-site kids' attractions.
Family-friendly catering options.
Value options – deals and linked partner deals.

Connection Opportunities:

Habitually planning out weekend activities.
Social media – when asking other parents for ideas.
When saving money elsewhere for clothes/shopping.
On money-saving websites.
At child-friendly venues they already go to

Be Selective:

Remember, while you can target a number of different visitor segments, it's unlikely you'll be able to credibly appeal to them all. For example, you can't position yourself as the last word in luxury weddings, while also positioning yourself as a low-cost wedding option. You would disappoint both visitor segments when they come to experience your offering. So how you craft your brand positioning statement must be based on the customer needs your offering can most naturally deliver against – both now and in the future.

Lots of larger organisations commission customer segmentation studies from professional consultants. This is great in understanding the customer types you are attracting; however, it usually involves significant investments in both time and money. On a smaller scale, you can use your own experience and customer feedback to think about the types of customers visiting you already, and what needs that you are satisfying. Look for patterns – is there a particular age, gender background of person or shared circumstance across visitors? Are there types of customers who you don't see often but think should be well represented given what you offer? What's holding them back? Perhaps you just need to make people aware of what you can offer them. Or maybe you need to develop your experience and your marketing more in line with their needs.



Tips:

- Learn from feedback.
- Invest time with visitors if you can.
- Speak to your guests and encourage them to share their experiences with others online.
- Be brave and ask them how you could improve things.
- Ask what you could do to make them want to return every year.
- Create a customer survey database and send regular updates to your existing customers.
- Create a customer survey and invite visitors to provide you with feedback.

2. Have I conducted a SWOT analysis?

A SWOT analysis allows you to think through the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing your business. It's a simple tool that allows you to consider 'the big picture' and allows you to investigate the questions 'Where are we now?' as well as 'Where could we be?' and 'How could we get there?'. Consider all the changes in your sector over the last 5 years and imagine what can happen in the next 5. This enables you to review what's happening in tourism in your sector.

You can develop a SWOT analysis for your business at a general level but you can also develop SWOTs against each of your key customer segments to really focus your thinking.



Tip: Try to be as specific as possible in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that have a significant impact on your competitiveness and prioritise them.

SWOT analysis

Internal	Strengths: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 50 years in business.• No one else offers what we do.• Competitive price.• Authentic food.• Family friendly.• Spa & Sauna.• Recent awards and accolades.	Weaknesses: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Remote location.• Recent staff turnover.• Poor internet connectivity.• No social media presence.• Cannot book online.• Product is dating.	External
	Opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Major tourism attraction opened nearby.• Upcoming local events this summer• New film/TV series due to film in the area.• Increased focus on marketing the general area.• Trend towards adventure holidays.• Value for money N.B. (economy).	Threats: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Competition opened nearby.• String of recent poor TripAdvisor reviews.• Improvements work required on building.• Economic uncertainty - people tightening belts• Trend for short-breaks overseas (people want something a bit different).	

3. What is distinct or unique about my brand?

Ask yourself the following questions:

What is the story of my business?

What are its origins? What inspired it as a business? Often there is a really engaging story behind a business that can help contribute to building an engaging brand.

What does my business believe in?

Most businesses are made up of people and that filters through to the visitor experience – positively or negatively. Ask yourself what it is that excites you the most about the business today. What are you passionate about when it comes to the business and does this come through in your offering? Imagine your business as a person. What sort of person would it be? What would it stand for? This helps you understand your brand values and they act as guiding principles that dictate behaviour and action within your business. Choose 3 or 4 values that are truthful to how you see your business and what you and your key staff care about, but which also chime with visitors. Visitors love authenticity and passion as this creates a more engaging and distinctive experience.

What are the reasons visitors come to my business right now?

They could have gone elsewhere, so why did they visit you? You can obtain feedback in a number of ways – such as visitor comment cards, a suggestion box or emailing visitors to complete an online survey. You can gain insight by monitoring social media and review sites to understand what people are saying about your business – both good and bad. Speak to staff. Their perspective is important, as they will liaise directly with customers, as well as having views of their own.



Tip: Involve your staff early in the process of defining your brand. They have coal-face knowledge, and will be essential in contributing how to bring your brand to life.

How is my business different from competitors?

Where else would your customers have gone if they weren't visiting you? This is your competitive set and will mostly include other businesses who do or offer something similar to you. But it may also include less obvious competitors who can satisfy the same needs that your customers have but in a different way. Understand your competition and take inspiration from competitors – both direct and indirect.

4. What sort of customer experience am I offering right now?

A customer experience audit helps you understand how you are performing across the customer journey. Ask yourself, are you delivering a consistently good experience or is it yo-yoing all over the place – good in some places, not so good in others. This allows you to explore each part of the journey and determine where improvements can be made. Delivering a consistent experience really matters. Here's an example of two NI hotels as they appear on TripAdvisor. Which one would you stay at?

Hotel A

Traveller rating



Hotel B

Traveller rating



Customers experience your brand through a series of touchpoints. These are moments of truth. Consider the rating system above. For each moment of truth, a customer will mentally assign a rating; 5 = excellent, 1 = terrible. So, think about the experience you offer and about all the moments of truth that make up that experience. A grumpy receptionist, that's a 2. Dirty toilets, that's a 1. Poor food, that's a 2. The reality is that it's rare that every part of an experience is poor, but it's the poor stuff that visitors often remember and tell other people about in reviews. So, you need to think through every single aspect of the experience.

Use the customer experience audit tool on page 10 to help you understand how your business is delivering across each touchpoint. Is there a website which lets you down a bit and doesn't do justice to what you offer? Are the staff consistently trained? There is nothing worse than a surly or dismissive member of staff to burst the bubble of a good experience. Are facilities clean – paying particular attention to the bathrooms? Is food fresh and good quality? Does the outside of your building look clean and welcoming?

Brand Audit of your business across the customer journey

Let's consider the following 5 phases:

1. Dreaming Phase
2. Planning Phase
3. Booking Phase
4. Experiencing Phase
5. Post-visit Phase

Dreaming Phase:

This is about sparking the interest of potential customers who won't be thinking about you, but are looking to get away/visit somewhere that meets their needs, so they'll be open to relevant suggestions.

What's important?

- Attractive and relevantly placed marketing materials – especially online display advertising and PR/social/editorial content focusing on your point of difference and the customer needs your experience satisfies.
- Encouraging positive word of mouth about your business from people who've already visited.
- Opportunities for earned content during experiencing – prompts to share the experience on social media etc.

How do we deliver?

- Are we visible?
- Are we making the most of our social media to create advocates?

Planning Phase:

This is when potential customers are actively searching for options that meet their needs – which would include you, but will also include competing destinations.

What's important?

Having a visible and positive digital footprint, including:

- An attractive and responsive website – working across all platforms.
- An active presence on social media platforms.
- Search engine optimisation on your website.
- Encouraging positive testimonials on websites and management of negative comments.

How do we deliver?

- Address any negatives areas of our digital footprint.
- Improving how we rank if people search for terms aligned with what we offer.
- Are enough past visitors speaking highly of us?
- Is there relevant content on the website against each customer group to help close the deal?

Booking Phase:

This is all about closing the deal. This could be done through an intermediary, but often directly with your business through ecommerce or by phone.

What's important?

- Professional ecommerce functionality online.
- Mobile booking and direct dial.
- Email confirmation and countdown to visit/what to expect.
- Friendly and helpful staff to field enquires and take bookings.

How do we deliver?

- Is our booking process as streamlined and intuitive as it could be?
- Are there any points in the booking process where potential visitors fall away?
- Do we have a system to ensure all potential bookings are captured?

Experiencing Phase:

The customer is committed at this point, but it doesn't end there. What happens during the experience will dictate if they return and recommend you to others.

What's important?

- A positive customer experience from booking with you through to arrival, duration of their stay to exiting.

How do we deliver?

- Confirming the booking
- Email reminders (pre-welcome)
- Signage on approach to destination
- First impression of the destination

Post-visit Phase:

This is when visitors have returned home after visiting. It is an opportunity to ask them to recommend you – as well as inviting them to visit again in the future.

What's important?

- Thanking customers for their visit (email) and asking them to share their experiences with others. Maybe run a friends and family referral discount.
- Capture data and invite back in due course (a prompt is all it might take).

How do we deliver?

- Are we capturing customer data to encourage repeat visits?
- Are we encouraging customers to become advocates for us on social media?



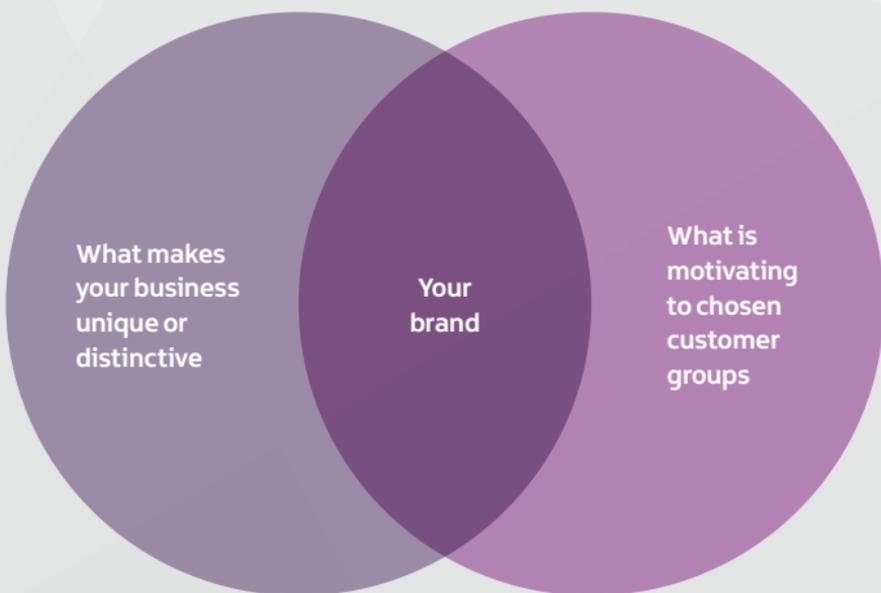
Tip: Create two versions of the customer experience audit:

1. 'Your business on a good day' – a best case scenario.
2. 'Your business on a bad day' – a worst case scenario.

Following the audit, create an Action Plan to address the specific issues you've identified, as well as the opportunities for you to deliver a more consistent brand experience.

How to develop your brand positioning statement:

Answering the previous questions helps you identify distinctive 'truths' about your business, as well as the type of customers who may find those truths appealing. The next step is to create your brand positioning statement for your business. This gives direction for your business in the form of a brand, helping you understand what you're focusing on, why, and the sort of company you aspire to be. It will explain what your brand does, who you target and the benefits of your brand in a short, concise statement.



How to write a brand positioning statement

It should contain 4 elements:

- 1. Category of business:** This is about defining the category in which your business operates. It may seem obvious, but as a tourism business your offering may overlap into multiple categories. So, defining the exact space in which you operate helps focus your attention.
- 2. The target audience:** Targeting a single group helps focus your efforts and deliver a more distinct, coherent and memorable experience. Remember, the group needs to be large enough to be viable so you need to work out who your most valuable customers are – now and in the future.
- 3. The benefit to the customer:** This is not about the features of what you offer but the benefit derived from the perspective of the customer. Very often these are emotional needs that are satisfied through what you offer.
- 4. Substantiation:** This is the reason why the brand can deliver the promised benefits to the target audience. Think of this as a credibility check as to how you can back this up.

You can then take these elements and fit them into the following brand positioning statement template:

Brand name here is a **(1) type of business here** that provides **(2). Target audience here** with **(3) benefits here** by **(4) how we do that here.**

Here's an example of a brand positioning statement created for a fictional tourism company called; 'Intrepid Friends'.

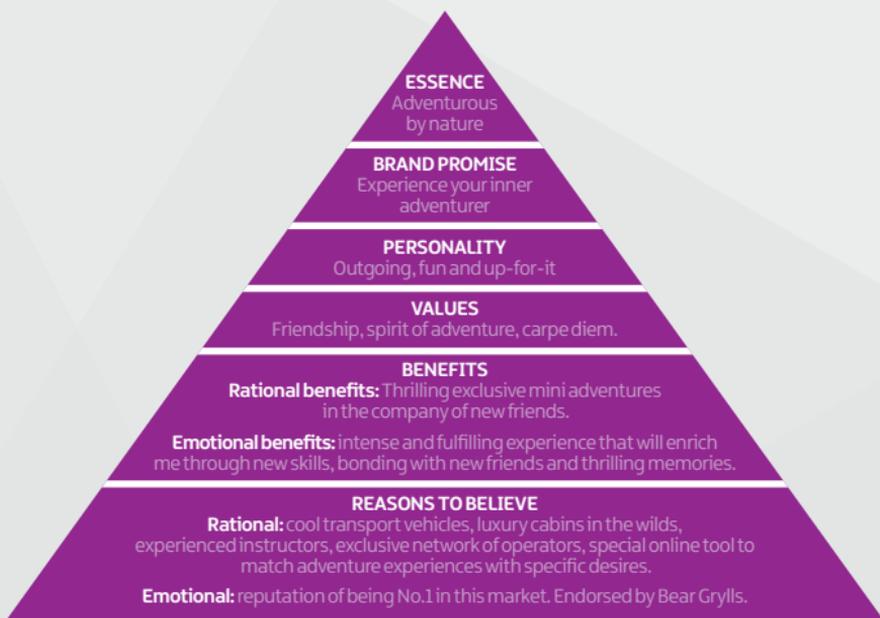
Intrepid Friends is an (1) adventure break business giving (2) fit, thrill-seeking singletons an opportunity (3) to discover themselves and new friends through pursuing active pursuits through (4) a range of specially curated shot-break experiences across the island of Ireland from mountain scrambling in the Mournes, to kayaking off Kerry.

Use a brand model to capture all this into a single brand 'ready reckoner'

The brand positioning statement allows you to create a brand model, which captures the key facets of your brand. Typically, this includes:

- **A brand promise:** this is the tangible benefit that makes your experience desirable to your audience. As such, it is externally focused to the customer.
- **The brand essence:** a pithy expression that captures the 'spirit of the brand'.
- **Reasons to believe:** this backs up the brand promise and includes both rational and emotional reasons to believe.
- **Rational reasons to believe:** the tangible aspects of the brand that support the promise.
- **Emotional reasons to believe:** this is rooted in the emotional attributes of the brand e.g. its reputation or positivity towards the brand due to other associations.
- **Benefits:** These are both rational and emotional benefits. The rational benefit is what the visitor gets to experience. The emotional benefit is how they feel about it, which is usually a richer territory.
- **Personality traits:** 3 or 4 characteristics that describe your brand as if it were a person.
- **Brand values:** 3 or 4 values that capture what you believe in a business or what you stand for.
- **Brand behaviours:** the behaviours that correspond to these values which outline how the business and everyone within it should consistently act. These can be fully articulated for staff to adopt.

Here's an example of a brand model developed for Intrepid Friends, our fictional adventure breaks company.



The value of having a brand model is that staff and partners have a tangible reference to fully understand what the business is about and how it will deliver. This helps to promote a consistent and authentic brand experience to visitors.



Tip: If you go online, you'll find many different brand models and how to complete them. Play around with them and use the one you feel most comfortable with.

How do I implement my brand?

The benefit of defining your brand is you can now ensure the visitor experience is consistently 'on brand'. Use the brand audit process to review each aspect of the customer journey, only this time using your brand as a 'lens' to scrutinize every area of the visitor experience across the 5 stages of the customer journey. For each area, ask yourself, is this 'on-brand'? If the answer is no, then you'll need to change something or introduce new elements that deliver against your brand.

Use brand guidelines.

You need to ensure every touchpoint with customers is consistent with your newly defined brand. This means encouraging brand-compliant behaviour in all who meet, deal or communicate with visitors. It also means protecting the brand in all marketing communications. Doing this in a consistent way builds confidence and trust in what you're offering to potential customers.

By creating brand guidelines, you ensure your brand is expressed in a consistent way. They ensure that anyone working with the brand know how to apply the brand. Most brand guidelines include the following sections:

- The brand model.
- Defining what your brand stands for in words.
- Creating a logo that reflects your brand and a tagline that captures the essence of your brand.
- A design scheme that has a distinctive look that is yours alone.
- Definition of key brand messages you want to convey to ensure all forms of communication have a common theme.
- A single tone of voice.
- Definition of brand values, which reflect the brand and what it stands for.



Tip: It's best to commission a professional designer to create these brand assets and capture them in a set of brand guidelines. This ensures anyone working with your brand will be aligned.

How do I monitor my brand?

This is about understanding how people's knowledge and perceptions of your brand change over time as your brand translates through to a better visitor experience.

There is no single technique to monitoring your brand. Methods range from sophisticated to straightforward. Among the more sophisticated (and expensive) approaches are commissioning visitor satisfaction and benchmarking surveys. You can also commission customer focus groups. Mystery shopper research is a useful tool for obtaining feedback regarding every aspect of the experience.

There are, however, cheaper alternatives to gauge how your brand is performing over time. You can listen to conversations about your brand on social media as well as specific feedback on sites like Facebook. You could set up Google Alerts to find out who's talking about you online. The use of customer comment captures like printed cards or feedback sections on your website are further means of gauging feedback. Online reviews (e.g. TripAdvisor) are also important.

The reality is if brand associations, perceptions and expectations are positive, you're definitely offering a good experience. You're probably offering something that feels unique and you're probably marketing yourself well, making visitors aware you there. And you'll be busy with visitors wanting to return and to endorse you on social media, helping your business grow further.

Checklist:

This guide is designed to help you work through the process of defining and managing your brand. There are no short-cuts. To make the most of the opportunity you will need to have completed the following stages of the process:

- Have you completed a SWOT analysis?**
Have you considered the key consumer trends shaping visitor needs? For more, visit <https://tourismni.com/facts-and-figures/tourism-intelligence/>
- Have you conducted a customer experience audit of your business?**
How does your business deliver across the 5 stages of customer journey?
- Have you defined the customer groups you want to target?**
Have you profiled your most valuable customers? Are there enough to be viable?
- Have you identified what is distinct, unique or interesting about your offering?**
Have you compared against competitors? Have you taken insights from customers/staff?
- Have you developed a brand positioning statement?**
And have you involved your staff in this?
- Have you developed a brand model?**
Have you defined behaviours in line with values?
- Have you developed a set of brand guidelines?**
Have you identified how the brand should be expressed in marketing communications?
- Have you conducted a brand audit?**
Have you modified your visitor experience in line with the newly defined brand?
- Are you monitoring brand impact?**
How are you going to check the brand is being successfully expressed throughout the visitor experience and how visitors and staff are responding to it?



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