

EMERGING COMPANIES

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More than a name

Company rebranding requires a lot more than a simple name change and an update of the company stationery. By **Kristen Le Mesurier**

A SMALL SUBURBAN TOWN ON Adelaide's fringe seems an unlikely birthplace for a national franchise. Like most start-up business owners, Mark Langford had no idea where his little company, GameTraders, would end up. He had no idea that in six years it would turn his hobby into a \$36-million, 35-store retail chain.

It is no surprise then that Langford spent little time and money designing the GameTraders brand. As the business powered past his early aspirations, Langford faced a problem common to fast-growth businesses: his brand was weak, dated, and didn't tell the market what his business offered. "We were entering the hyper-competitive shopping centres all over Australia. We were up against Kmart, Target, all the big retailers who slash prices to draw customers in. If we hadn't worked out what our point of difference was and then communicated it to the market through our brand, we wouldn't have survived," Langford says.

He spent \$60,000 redesigning every element of the brand – the logo, the graphics, slogans, the store fit-outs, the website, right down to staff uniforms and product receipts – but he says it was worth every cent. Langford attributes a 46 per cent increase in sales in some stores to the rebranding.

Good branding requires planning and small-business owners are renowned for relegating planning and strategy to the bottom of their long to-do lists. Most attest that there are not enough hours in the day, and that agility is far more important than time lines and targets. It is an attitude that frustrates the experts, who say it is one of the biggest mistakes business owners make. "Thinking about who your customers are, what your brand is, where you want the business to be, compared with where the business fits in the market now, is absolutely critical – especially if you're trying to grow," Damien Tantling, a partner in Deloitte's corporate finance division, says.

Australia's fastest-growing businesses value planning. Hit and miss might characterise their start-up years, but almost 90 per cent of businesses listed on this year's *BRW Fast 100* list have business plans that are revised monthly or quarterly to make sure that their businesses are on track. Most are masters of reinvention.

Business owners with ambitions to expand interstate or businesses with logos or names that no longer gel with the products or services being sold are prime candidates for rebranding, according to Adrian McFedries, managing director of consultancy firm DC Strategy. "If you're looking for scale or wanting to duplicate your operation, then it's absolutely critical that the brand tells the market what you're offering," he says.

Businesses with names that cannot be trademarked or websites that need a .com.au or .com domain name often force business owners to rebrand. "It's really a case of the earlier the better," McFedries says, "because the bigger your presence, the more expensive rebranding becomes."

McFedries warns small-business owners not to get swept up in the design stage of branding. Complicated logos may look impressive, but he says that simple works best. "One of the challenges is picking an image that will stand the test of time and grow with the business. There's no point spending all that money only having to change it again four years later," he says.

Working to a time line is a good idea because half-worked changes look sloppy. That means updating the stationery, the website, business cards, signs out the front of the store or office, loyalty programs, advertising, and white and yellow page listings at the same time. Communicating why the change has been made to the market is also important. "Send out a little brief to key customers and suppliers. It avoids confusion, but more than that, it's an opportunity to talk to the market. Get a bit of feedback," McFedries says.

There is a lot more to rebranding than paying a design firm to come up with a catchy logo and replacing all of the stationery. Neil Damerow, the owner of the fast-growing recruitment firm Workscan Recruitment, describes the process as a journey. He planned to spend about \$25,000 modernising his logo and repositioning the business because competition in his market was intensifying. One year and \$80,000 later, he has given the business and his staff a complete overhaul.

"We basically had to reinvent ourselves because the market was so saturated," he says. "When the

designer asked me what Workscan stood for, what its values were, I thought seriously about how I wanted the business to be seen. Once I started digging – looking at our processes, our staff, our service, I realised we could be doing so many things so much better."

Damerow rounded up his staff and organised workshops that were designed to draw out Workscan's values. He handed around the whiteboard pen and asked staff to brainstorm phrases and colours that captured what the brand looked like to them.

"That was the most fascinating exercise. It was easy to pick those who were committed to the business. Others were like rabbits in front of the spotlight," Damerow says.

Workscan's recruitment processes, candidate and client management policies, office administration routines and financial management processes have all been revised, and Damerow has replaced three staff members. He has also changed his service and fee structure to differentiate Workscan from the hundreds of other recruiters that service the engineering industry.

The stationery, banners and email signatures have been updated with a new, brighter logo, but Damerow still spends between four and 15 hours a week revising the business plan.

"If you don't bother looking at the business from the inside, all you've done is changed the look. That's not going to be a big revenue winner," Damerow says. ●

How to rebrand smoothly

1. Expect to blow the rebranding budget. Paying designers for logos is just part of the cost.
2. Involve staff in the process. This gives employees a sense of ownership and creates excitement about the changes.
3. Use the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive review of the business.
4. Explain the changes to the market.
5. Work to a strict time line. A mixture of old and new looks sloppy.