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## "What's my brand?"

When you're a small, independent restaurant, it can be easy to feel discouraged. After all, if there are big franchises down every block, how can you compete?

The good news is that your restaurant's status as a small business isn't a flaw — it's a feature

Researchers at Pentallect Inc. are estimating independent restaurants' revenue will grow about 5% in the next five years.¹ Customers want to frequent restaurants they can trust to have a unique point of view and place within the community. As a result, authenticity should be a core element to your branding and point of view as a business.

It's true: being a locally-owned, independent restaurant business can actually give you an edge in the market that other restaurants lack — if you manage your brand correctly.

You can hone that independent edge by following a few simple ideas in defining your core mission and intellectual brand, developing your visual brand identity, keeping it consistent over time, and maintaining that reputation in the toughest market of all: the internet.

The following four chapters each dig into one of these stages in the roadmap of securing a unique identity for your business, starting with the foundation for it all: **brand vision**.



## **Defining Your Brand Vision**

Not just your logo. Not just your name. Your brand is the reflection of everything your restaurant represents. And it starts from the top down.

What does that mean? It's starting with a high-level vision of what you stand for, then drilling down to every detail of the experience your customer receives.

When you're looking to build that deeper sense of your brand, it's important to begin with five key ingredients:

- A vision statement
- Your unique mission statement
- Overarching values
- Your business goals
- Specific objectives

All five are dependent on each other and need to work together in order to build a great restaurant brand.

And, by having a better understanding of your restaurant's brand, you can clearly communicate it through everyday actions and words. Whether through your staff's service or your website, you want to achieve brand loyalty, where customers become fans and keep coming back for more, ultimately driving word of mouth referrals.

Knowing where you have been and where you're going in the future can help you run your restaurant better today. Here's how to do just that, beginning with your Vision Statement.

## **Looking into Your Crystal Ball**

No one can truly predict the future, but most of us have some sense of where we want to be down the road. The same goes for your restaurant. You've built this great restaurant concept, but what is your long-term vision for it?

A vision statement expresses what you hope your restaurant will contribute to the greater good, which can be the impact on your customers, your community, or both. It defines the future state of your restaurant and what you ultimately aspire to be.

Your vision statement also answers the question "Why do you run your business the way you do?" It influences all decisions, large to small, from concept to overall management to menu selection.

The tone and wording of your vision statement should inspire your staff to do their best every day, be easy to understand, and illustrate the type of company culture you're creating. Inspiring your staff to think big can only result in providing better service, quality food and drink, and a great atmosphere. In this sense, a brand is your restaurant's personality. Having your overall aspirations outlined clearly sets up success for every action taken today — and into the future.

For example, PepsiCo's vision statement encompasses this forward-thinking aspect of their business: "To deliver top-tier financial performance over the long term by integrating sustainability into our business strategy, leaving a positive imprint on society and the environment."

On the flip side, U.S. Foods's mission statement leans towards less words and to the point of their continued ambitions: "First in Food."

The tone and wording of your vision statement should inspire your staff to do their best every day.

Once you've got your vision statement locked down, it's time to take a look at the next critical piece of your brand: The Mission Statement.

### **Mission: Possible**

A mission statement works in parallel to your company's vision statement. Unlike the vision statement which expresses your restaurant in a future state, the mission statement speaks more simply to what your business does every day and why it exists.

This statement includes some of the basic facts of your business and describes exactly what you do — and why. This can include the type of food you serve, the customer you serve it to, why you do so, and perhaps even your general market price or restaurant type.

One example from a Rewards Network client, **Rosati's Pizza**, is simple,

straightforward, and clearly explains the what, why, and how of their business:

"Our mission is to provide customers with high-quality signature Chicago pizzas, pasta, and sandwiches from authentic Italian family recipes."

If your brand is the personality of your restaurant, think of it like a person. If you were to describe that person to a stranger, what would be their defining traits? What are the values that make up their unique characteristics?



#### The Values of a Great Brand

Your business' core values are the traits or qualities that should be transmitted in every element of your brand, from big to small. These values reflect and support your Vision and Mission statements.

On a more granular level, they should exist in the day-to-day details of your restaurant. In simple marketing terms, that's your 5 P's: product, place, promotion, price, and people, encompassing customer service, management policies, food selections, atmosphere, and marketing communications like advertising, websites, emails, and more.

Values can also reflect personality traits as well. They are a guideline of the company culture you want to have, and that includes how you want your employees to conduct themselves. The number of core values you develop and implement are up to you, but, try starting with five keywords (with a little explanation). This is a manageable amount to be remembered and understood by your entire staff.

### **Goals and Objectives**

Once you've established a high-level vision, mission, and values, it's time to establish workable goals and objectives that help you achieve and maintain that vision, mission, and values.

When establishing goals and objectives, many businesses use the SMART methodology, creating objectives that are:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Timely

How do goals and objectives differ? Goals tend to be broader in nature and describe what you want to achieve. For a restaurant, this might be something like "increasing restaurant sales."

# Rosati's core values

## Consistency

"Rosati's Pizza takes pride in providing the same recipes and products throughout the entire United States. What makes Rosati's different is that no matter where you are in the United States, you will find the same original family recipes."

## **Quality**

"Rosati's Pizza commits to high-quality ingredients for all recipes. Rosati's has branded products you will not find at any other pizzeria. It's the pizza you'll fall in love with!"

### **Customer Service**

"Rosati's Pizza strives for the greatest consumer experience not only at the store level, but also at the corporate level. Only the best possible staff who embody Rosati's Mission, Vision and Values joins the Rosati's family!" An objective is the answer to "how" you're going to achieve the goal. These are essentially your metrics for success, either qualitative or quantitative, that provide a target for knowing you've achieved your goal. If your goal is to increase restaurant sales, then an objective might be to develop a responsive website that geo-targets local customers.

While goals should be few in number, there can be multiple objectives set to accomplish each individual goal.

#### Don't Be a Dust Collector

It might take a little time to develop your vision, mission, values, goals, and objectives. But they in turn lay out a roadmap that can be used for the duration of your business and change as you need to. Having that map for where you're going helps to efficiently and effectively manage all aspects of your restaurant.

At the same time, you need to make sure that these items don't collect dust and remain unused! Be a proponent of consistently and frequently communicating all five core elements of your brand where applicable.

For your staff, communicate these pieces of your brand when you hire and onboard/train, or even have a quick recap at the beginning of regular shift meetings for reinforcement. Post your vision statement, mission, and values in break areas so they are visible at all times and can inspire you and your team on a daily basis.

Looking to create or refresh your actual **brand identity?**Read on to learn more!



## **Developing a Brand Identity**

Creating new and exciting dishes from scratch is part of the normal flow of a restaurateur's life. Combining the right ingredients with just the right amount of TLC can develop a delicious and intriguing new menu item for your customers enjoy to again and again.

But when it comes time to cook up a restaurant brand identity from scratch, how do you choose what to include? The same concepts in developing a new menu item apply. You have to measure out and combine the right design ingredients if you want to create a powerful brand identity. Fonts, colors, logos, typography treatments — the choices can be endless.

A great brand can also influence other choices you need to make for your restaurant, from chairs to lighting as your visual brand should be in unison with your overall restaurant concept. Whether you're revamping your current brand identity, or looking to start a completely new restaurant concept, follow these suggested guidelines to save time, money, and frustration down the road as you build an effective and powerful visual brand for your restaurant.

#### Where do I start?

Initial concepting should begin long before the actual hands-on work of creating a brand identity on paper. Much like deciding what type of restaurant concept to launch, there's a significant discovery process to help you better understand what your visual brand could look like. Most likely, you'll need to share your vision with a graphic designer so they can hone in on specific design choices that match the style you're seeking. Having a clear idea of what you want (with samples of similar things you like or hate) before a designer begins to bill will make for a much more efficient and productive branding process.



Step one in determining your brand is to write down three or four adjectives to describe what you would want your brand (i.e. your restaurant) to express. Draw upon the story or history of your restaurant, its menu, and the actual name of the establishment for inspiration.

These adjectives are ultimately what you would like your customers' perception of your restaurant to be. They should have a direct influence on every aspect of your brand, including the colors, fonts — even the actual structure of the logo and other brand pieces. For instance, "My restaurant is hip and upbeat, yet modern."

Here are some additional questions and tips to get you started on the brand exploration process:

- What do you want your customer to feel when they look at your visual brand?
- Is your brand "evergreen," meaning can it stand the test of time? Or does it incorporate colors or fonts that are trendy and could quickly become outdated?
- Are you gravitating toward elements that every other restaurant or small business uses? For instance, Papyrus font or the image of a fork and knife? Avoid these at all costs.
- Where do you plan to use your brand identity? Write out a list of all the items and areas where your logo and name will appear — from the welcome floor mat and napkins to your website and outdoor signage. Remember, it's important to maintain a high level of brand integrity. It has to remain scalable, legible, and cohesive no matter where it lives.



 Take a look at the competition and see how they have chosen to brand themselves. What do you like about their visual brands, what do you feel when you look at them, and does the brand seem to match the restaurant's concept? Record those answers.  If you are creating a new brand identity and scrapping your old brand completely, what is it that you liked and didn't like about it? Did it not hold true to your ultimate vision?

#### **Get in the Mood**

After establishing the premise of your brand identity, start working with a designer to bring the concept to life. The first step for your designer is likely to create mood boards, based upon their initial conversation with you and their understanding of your brand vision.

A mood board is essentially a collage of visuals that hopes to capture the essence of a brand. Much like an interior designer will bring swatches of tile and carpet tacked onto a physical board to their client's home, a graphic designer will create similar boards on their computers. These boards can include a color palette, as well as visuals of other branding items such as fonts, symbols, icons, specific graphic treatments, and possibly branding from other companies similar to what you're looking for.

#### **Build Some Brand Basics**

After writing out your brand description and approving your designer's mood boards, your next steps will be to establish a logo, color scheme, and fonts. It's important to note that not all brands actually have or need a logo. Many companies simply use a "wordmark" or "logotype," which is simply the company name professionally set in a specific font, color, and/or graphical treatment.

But if you are going to create a logo, be thoughtful about whether it can consistently live across many mediums. A logo should be flexible enough to scale up or down depending on where it appears. An intricate logo with small design details (such as words within the logo) may look fine at a normal or large scale. But when you place the logo onto a much smaller print area, such as a business card or guest receipt template, it can quickly become illegible or skew it to the point of being unrecognizable.



When you place your logo onto a much smaller print area, such as a business card or guest receipt template, it needs to be legible. When choosing a color scheme, it's important to select colors meaningful to your brand, not just to you personally. Because people naturally associate them with emotions, the colors of your brand play as important a role as the other graphic elements.

If your concept is focused on organic offerings, uses a lot of local produce, or has a rooftop garden, colors such as green or brown may play well into your branding. Green denotes nature and freshness, and brown is a traditional earthy color often associated with food — a nod to the type of cuisine you produce. Your color palette can also include secondary color options to use as additional spot colors or to help define different services within your brand identity.



When it comes to fonts, there are millions of fonts to choose from and they come in a variety of styles — cursive, gothic, hand drawn, retro, novelty and many others. A good designer should be able help you narrow down choices and find ones that are in alignment with your brand vision. You can

also have a primary and second typographic treatment as well. Like the logo, your font needs to be legible when scaled down to a very small print area.

#### Let Me See Your ID

Once all these decisions are set down, it's time to create the Brand ID Guide (BIG). This is a document that you can provide any vendor (sign designer, menu printer, interior decorator, uniform supplier) that will explain the rules of the road for your brand identity. This will ensure the integrity of your visual brand over time and across multiple stakeholders.

Included in the BIG are all the elements that make up your visual brand basics, including:

- naming conventions
- logos
- fonts
- color palette
- photography
- brand voice
- and the dos and don'ts of how to use all of them.

For example, logos need to be adapted for different uses. The BIG shows vendors multiple "lockups" that clearly show full color, reversed out, grayscale, and solid black variations. You may also need your logo to appear in spaces that won't fit all the elements of its original design. If you have a horizontal logo — but a square print space — the BIG can help explain to the vendor how much wiggle room they have in skewing the logo's design to fit the print area.

## Your visual brand basics:

**Naming Conventions** 

**Do this:**Joe's Burgers®

Not this:

Joes Burgers Joe's burgers

Logos





**Fonts** 



**Colors** 



**Photography** 







If you use photography consistently in your branding efforts, the BIG can also outline what type is considered "on brand." For example, photographs may require a specific lighting, focus, or color overlay applied. Photographs aren't your only imagery option, of course, as many brands use original illustrations as well. Just make sure you have guidelines established in your BIG for those as you would any other element.

In addition to these basics, go one step further and show how the brand will look in real-life applications. Place these final mock-ups of your menu cover, signage, uniforms, and/or advertising within the BIG. It will help vendors understand how you expect your brand to look across other communication pieces.

Creating a brand identity is not a quick process. There are multiple steps and revisions to get through before arriving at a final product. But with the right design ingredients and time — and a bit of hard work — you'll be able to build the right brand from the ground up, one that compliments your restaurant's concept and appeals to your audience.

Now that you've got your new brand identity, how do you **keep it consistent** over time?



## **Maintaining Brand Consistency**

"Brand" is a word frequently spoken in the business world, but often used without knowing what it actually means. More often than not, your brand is thought to simply mean a restaurant's name or logo. (This is where the bzzzzzt sound of a buzzer goes off!)

Your brand goes deeper than just the surface of the business name and logo. As a restaurateur, answering the simple — but still challenging — question of "What is your brand?" to those who ask can be difficult, but being able to do so clearly provides powerful guidance to your everyday business decisions, from food menu items to restaurant renovation decisions.

#### The Silent Voice of Your Business

We are surrounded by brands every day. Big companies spend millions of dollars every year creating imagery, marketing, online experiences, and more to do one simple thing: to bring life to their brand for the consumer. By doing so, they are giving the company a personality.

Take a moment and think about some of the brands you interact with every day. Think about ones that you like and you'll understand what we are talking about.

Take Apple, for example. With their physical stores, Apple aims to provide a place that customers can come to and resolve their product's tech issues right away.

The Genius Bar within the store gives Apple the opportunity to be more customer-centric, approachable, and engaging by providing "geniuses" that can speak directly with customers, face to face.

The look of the store itself is also a big part of the brand experience. They provide a space that has clean lines, is well-lit, and is easy to move around to contrast to their competitors' technology, which can be complex, overwhelming, and cluttered.

This is why it's so vital to have a firm understanding of what your restaurant's brand is. It's details that make up the dining experience for your customers and ultimately, that's really what makes the brand experience.

The details that make up your brand absolutely include your actual logo and brand colors, but that's not all. It's important to expand your thinking on what makes up your brand, as every attribute you put into your restaurant counts. The fixtures on the ceiling, the chairs customers sit on, the type of menus you choose, and everything in between equate to the sum of your restaurant's brand.

## **Describing Your Restaurant's Brand**

One of the best ways to help employees or vendors understand your brand is to think of adjectives or key phrases to describe your restaurant's concept (as if it were a person). Remember, brands essentially emote personality traits. It's the reason some of the best brands in the world (regardless of the size of their business) create loyal and repeat customers. They've evoked feelings and emotions that people connect with, as if the brand was a real person.

Think about when someone asks you to describe a person you're familiar with. You typically say things like, "Joe is a great guy! He's fun to be around, has a positive outlook and always does the unexpected."

When it comes to describing a restaurant, people will ask their friends and family what the experience was like, and



Details are what make up the dining experience for your customers.

they too will come up with words to describe that experience. For example, "Joe's Café was a great place to have lunch. The food was eclectic, the servers were friendly, and the atmosphere and décor were modern. It gave the place a hip/upbeat energy!"

**Be Your Own Brand Police** 

In every business, restaurants included, you need to have a watchdog for your brand — or as some may call it, "the brand police." As an owner, this will most likely be you, if you don't employ the right (or enough) staff to understand the brand vision. You want to avoid inadvertently making decisions that do not align to your ultimate vision, so an informed brand watchdog is absolutely necessary.



As you upgrade and renovate your restaurant over the course of its lifespan, you may see your brand standards slip over time. While you may find great discounts on items such as light fixtures, glassware, and uniforms that may not match your original vision, the

overall brand experience can start to fall off course. You may have saved money in the short term, but those slightly cheaper replacements may not accurately reflect the brand you've established, affecting your success in the long term.



Make an ongoing assessment of your brand by spending some time in the front and middle of the house, as a customer would. (Yes, this means spending a little time in the restaurant's bathroom as well — this is part of their overall experience!)

Ask yourself some questions while you review your restaurant's details to make sure they live up to the brand you want to exude:

Do I have mismatched items, like chairs, tables, menus, lighting fixtures, tablecloths, paint on the walls, décor, tiles on the floor, etc.?

Do all the items that include my logo and brand colors reflect the same font, colors, and overall treatment? Or have they started to vary over time on menus, signage, napkins, take out bags, uniforms, etc.?



Does my overall floor layout — from the hostess/waiting area and the seating area — make sense for my brand? Is it too crowded, missing an area for a bar, or patio, etc.?

Does the décor match your brand? Remember fine details such as lighting, paint, pillows, and artwork help to sum up your brand's personality.

Do you have a brand identity guide that you can give to any vendor or employee that explains the "rules of the road" of your brand?

Does your customer experience match up to your brand's personality? Have you taken time to look at online customer reviews and hear what customers have thought of your brand? And more so, does that perception match up to your vision?

### **The Human Side of Branding**

You might have heard about the four "P's" of marketing: product, price, promotion and place. There's actually a fifth "P" that smart business owners also consider that is just as critical to an overall brand: **people.** 

Part of the brand and dining experience your customer has depends on everyone who interacts with them. This includes the hostess, the server, the busser, and even kitchen staff.

It's important to look at how your staff is trained to interact with customers: how they greet at the door, how reservations are taken on the phone, how specials are offered at the table, and even drilling down to different customer service scenarios.

To have a great brand does not necessarily mean that you need to spend millions. You just need to be conscious of the individual decisions that add up to your overall brand over time.

But for true success with your brand, it's not enough to focus on the inside and outside of your establishment. You need to **manage your brand online** as well.



## **Preserving Your Brand Online**

In recent years, businesses have discovered that how they're perceived by internet users can make a big difference, not just in their online reputation, but also in their reputation as a whole. For restaurants in particular, online reviews and testimonials are a big part of that perception, and restaurant owners can certainly take steps to respond appropriately to those reviews, both the positive and negative ones.

However, that's not the only way potential customers learn about your business. In fact, the information you manage online yourself can be a big influence in how they view your restaurant. Yes, you only have so much in your control in terms of your online reputation, but make sure the things that ARE in your control can be made the most effective.

## **Your Online Reputation**

Are you registered in local business directories? Yellow Pages, AllMenus, CitySearch, and Google My Business are just a few of the many helpful online listings for businesses. Certainly, making sure you're registered in these local business directories and the other major ones in your area is an important factor in targeting the right customer for your restaurant.

You can manage your brand (and to an extent, the perception of your brand) by being registered for these listing, as well as your social media and professional websites. But for these profiles to do you any good, there must be consistency and accuracy in submitting and updating this information, particularly in the areas below.

#### Name and Phone Number

If you're going to be in these local directories, make sure that every listing is as consistent as possible, starting with your name. The business name needs to be the same in every instance. If your business is a multi-unit, you need to name each unit's designation consistently. Store numbers typically don't need to be included – those are more for your internal reference. Think about what a consumer would call your restaurant – you want to be listed as how they're going to search for you. If the phone number is different for each location, be clear about that for each location's listing.



#### **Address**

Even how you spell out your address should be consistent across all platforms, including whether you spell out designations like "North" or use abbreviations, and if you use a suite number.

And for that matter, make sure it's all spelled correctly! The reason behind this consistency

is not only to make your information as clear as possible for visitors to use (no good comes from adding barriers to a customer's visit), but also because it reflects on your professionalism and online reputation as a business. If you're sloppy with how you present your basic business information, how can consumers know you aren't sloppy with other parts of your business, too?

#### Menus

Every platform your information is on should include an up-to-date menu. And in order to expedite that process, an easy-to-edit menu document should be kept on your computer at all times. That way, whenever you have a new menu item or need to change your pricing, you can easily update the document and re-upload it wherever it's been posted.



## **Hours of Operation**

Your hours should also be consistent and correct throughout all directories, your website, and your social media accounts.

Be aware that there are some platforms that have restrictions on how you fill out your hours. For instance, if you close in the middle of the day (between shifts, for instance), then certain directories might not allow for that split in time. Even then, make sure you put that information SOMEWHERE in the description, even if the "Hours" area doesn't let you do that.



### Cuisine

Describe your cuisine accurately. A common perception is that the more specific you are, the more you're hurting yourself if no one is searching for that specific thing. Cuisine types should be about the style or cultural traditions, not individual specialties you offer – save this for your marketing and business description. You might also have the instinct to put your restaurant down for as many categories as you possibly can on any given business listing website. After all, if your business shows up on more pages, the more likely you'll get picked, right?

But potential customers click on certain tags because they're looking for that certain thing. Putting yourself down for a cuisine that doesn't really fit your food is not only misrepresenting your menu, it's also misleading consumers. They're going to notice when they look at your menu, and they won't be happy.

Multi-units also need to be consistent when it comes to cuisine description and brand. If your restaurant wants to be listed under "Mexican" and nothing is different about the brand from location to location, all of your locations need to be listed as Mexican.

## **Market Segment**

The same goes for categorizing the type of restaurant your business is. For instance, if you've stated you're a general casual restaurant, but you want to promote yourself as upscale casual, then just say upscale casual – but make sure your atmosphere and price point accurately reflects this designation.

If the platform allows you to describe your price point from \$ to \$\$\$\$\$, pick the most accurate point and make it consistent throughout all the different listings. Don't try to be everything for everyone. That can often lead to being nothing for nobody in particular — a deadly result for any business's online reputation.

### **Delivery Radius and Neighborhood**

Service area (and location area) needs to be accurate. If you say you deliver within a certain radius, someone calls in a delivery order and you tell them "sorry, we don't deliver there," the would-have-been customer will be rightfully frustrated and less likely to visit your location when they're actually in the area.

If you're going to include your restaurant's neighborhood in the listing, make sure you specify the right neighborhood, not just a popular one that's sort of near you. And unless it's officially part of your business name, put the neighborhood on a separate line to keep your branding consistent. Speaking of ...

#### **Brand**

Your logo should also be consistent across all platforms. When you update your branding, make sure to update your logo everywhere, not just your business' own website. Make sure all of your links work on your website, and keep your staff pages updated. On top of that, be prepared to have a shorter description AND a longer description of your restaurant that you can share on different sites quickly.

Ultimately, if you can keep track of your listings, your social media, and your website information, you can take control of your online reputation and brand — and help your future customers find you.



Take control of your online reputation and brand — and help your future customers find you.



## "So, what's my niche?"

For the independent restaurant owner, the instinct can often be to "go big or go home" when all is said and done. The problem with that line of thinking is that you simply can't be all things to all people.

While some big chain businesses can offer everything and see a profit, small businesses can't afford to be mid-market without that "it" factor. The lack of "it" can kill your independent restaurant. When there are so many other restaurants out there for your potential guests to choose, your menu and overall brand need to clearly make a statement. Offering every food under the sun in an attempt to appeal to everyone will only tell would-be customers that you don't know what you want to be.

The solution, beyond just developing a solid brand, is finding a niche and sticking to it. Niche is a crucial element in the success of the independently owned restaurant. It's about finding the specialty your restaurant provides and then getting really good at it. If you offer authentic, fresh Chinese cuisine, don't dilute your brand by including pizza or hamburgers as part of your menu.

Streamline your menu to focus on your expertise so your guests see you as a cuisine expert. But niche doesn't have to mean cuisine exclusively! It could also mean an extremely efficient fast casual service, or a vegan-friendly menu, or a unique line of cocktails. It just needs to be something you do well and that people want.



What experience do your diners want to have? And how can you make that experience as real as possible?

Learn from the experience of independent bookstores. While Amazon.com is still a challenge for the "Mom and Pop" bookstores out in the world, the storefronts that thrive aren't trying to be Amazon. They're trying to be the best version of their niche in the bookselling world. And their customers come to them specifically for that special expertise their shop can provide that Amazon just can't.

The ultimate question for your business is: what experience do your diners want to have? And how can you make that experience as real as possible?

The answer to those two questions is where true branding success lies.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> "Mom-and-Pop Joints Are Trouncing America's Big Restaurant Chains" – Bloomberg.com



Want to learn more about how Rewards Network can help your restaurant grow?

Contact us today:

restaurants@rewardsnetwork.com or visit RewardsNetwork.com

