



A lesson in rebranding

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Here's how ArtisTree changed its image to stand-out from the competition.

PETER CHAKERIAN | May 2, 2012 |

The list of challenges for 21st century small businesses is a long one. For many green industry companies, hours are filled with thoughts long and hard on how to grow the business. For some, finding additional revenue streams through new services makes perfect sense. But what if you feel your service offerings are just right, at a peak quality, and yet you struggle to separate yourself from local competition?

Folks like Debra Morrow, vice president of marketing for the Venice, Fla.-based ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design, suggest what some proprietors see as a vague investment strategy at best and a scary business proposition at worst: *rebranding*.

A brave new world. Known for its attention-grabbing trucks with large oval logos, ArtisTree specializes in planned community/commercial maintenance and landscape design/installation. ArtisTree's services include community maintenance, pest control, irrigation, tree service, landscape design and installation, hardscape installation and landscape lighting.

But getting its treetops above the competition required some strategic pruning and fertilization. The company "unveiled a new brand identity to better communicate its customer-service values of quality and integrity" last year, Morrow says.

With a new motto "Deeper roots. Higher standards." and a "quality and responsibility" vision driving the brand, the 21-year-old company hoped to bring new focus to its customer service. "We wanted to break away from the 'me-too' kind of business appearance, because we're really quite distinctive," Morrow says. "The goal was to humanize our company, which we thought would help our business thrive. And it has. And yet, we're in this commodity type of business, where the bottom line is always in view." Which is to say, sometimes you have to spend money to make money. But we'll get to that time-old business axiom in a minute.

A family affair. "Even though we have 250 employees, founder and CEO Joe Gonzalez views ArtisTree as a self motivated, close-knit family of smart, hardworking individuals," Morrow says.



ArtisTree did a complete rebranding, which included bolstering its trucks with an enhanced logo and reworking its mission statement.

“But sometimes that just doesn’t translate to others when you’re talking communication strategy.” So what really changed? From the actual business approach, very little. But in terms of how the branding approach was relayed to the potential clientele, quite a bit changed. And with a 100 percent buy-in from the employees – all of whom had some say and input in the process – “everyone in the company walks a little bit taller and prouder these days,” Morrow says. “Our potential customers see our brand or our advertising now and can envision how we can help them create a customized environment suited to their tastes,” says ArtisTree’s Shawn Gulbrandsen, a landscape designer and certified arborist. John Lay, ArtisTree’s general manager of the Landscape Installation Division, adds that the new face of the company really reinforces the quality workmanship of the company. It shows that “we hold ourselves to higher standards,” Lay says.

Here’s the 411. ArtisTree’s campaign bolstered its highly recognizable trucks with an enhanced logo and a revitalized mission statement. It augmented that with mixed marketing, such as direct mail, tradeshow collateral, realty partnerships, “dressing out” exhibition-for-sponsorship-trades, social media strategy, print ads and a new website. Morrow describes the new mentionings like this: “robust and irreverent” with a brand personality that added a touch of silly to the serious while focusing on “complete satisfaction of customers” and “earning and keeping the trust and satisfaction of customers and pride of employees.” “It’s working really well for us, and has actually helped us add a lot more design clients to what was traditionally an 80/20 maintenance to design clientele for ArtisTree,” she says.

This new branding helped increase ArtisTree’s visibility tenfold, Morrow said. “We really found our way in front of a lot more people, a lot more often, and with a message that said what we wanted to say about our service level, employees and pride in what we do.”

Money and messaging. With more than 20 years of brand establishment under her belt as the former president of an advertising and public relations firm in Fort Worth, Texas, Morrow originally came to ArtisTree as a brand consultant. She understands that distinguishing brands and strategic visions from fellow competitors is touchy for business owners – and can be a hit to the wallet.

Naturally, all of this rebranding stuff sounds expensive, right? Morrow says it can be, and not just in a cash flow sort of way. Dismissing the old brand equity in a rebranding process can alienate established customers; merely “tweaking” an existing strategy can be costly and ineffective. A happy messaging medium lies therein, Morrow says. So, just how much did the rebranding cost and what has the impact been for ArtisTree? Morrow wouldn’t share how much ArtisTree spent, but she had this to offer. “In broad terms, it’s definitely resulted in many new accounts – particularly in the design side – and great in attracting and recruiting new quality employees, which is significant in this industry,” she says. “Finding and keeping the right people in the industry is big, and we’ve found that 80 percent of those ‘right people’ we’ve interviewed and hired have been influenced by rebranding and web presence. “If there’s a third prong to the rebranding, it’s that pride and morale has never been higher.”

Pressed for answers on what a typical lawn, landscape or hardscape company might expect to fork out for a rebranding strategy, she hinted at a “2-5 percent cost of sales for marketing budget.” It’s certainly an investment. But work up this little cost-benefit analysis in your head: Morrow is also quick to add that ArtisTree’s “gross sales last year were \$13.5 million, which we were all very pleased with.”