
How to Build a Brand Pyramid



By Patrick 'Mad' Mork (INSEAD MBA '00J), Executive Coach & Chief Storyteller,
[madmork stories](#)

A vital tool that will help you define the very essence of your brand.

In this world full of ads, companies need to cut through the noise. The smartest way to do that is to build a strong, memorable brand and relentlessly nurture it over time. Whether you're a Fortune 500 company or a small start-up, solid branding can reward you with pricing power, customer loyalty, lower advertising costs and inspired employees.

However, many companies struggle with branding. Whenever I start coaching a chief marketing or chief executive officer, the first thing I do is ask the company's key stakeholders a number of questions including:

1. How would you describe your business in one sentence?
2. What customer problem are you solving? What's the benefit?
3. What's the emotional value of your product? How should the customer feel after using your product?
4. What are your core values?

5. What's the essence of your brand? What's the core idea you're trying to communicate?

6. What's your company's mission and vision?

More often than not, particularly in tech or early-stage companies, when I ask 5-10 people these questions, the answers are all over the map. Although there might be some overlap of general ideas and concepts, responses to my questions tend to be inconsistent, confused or plain wrong.

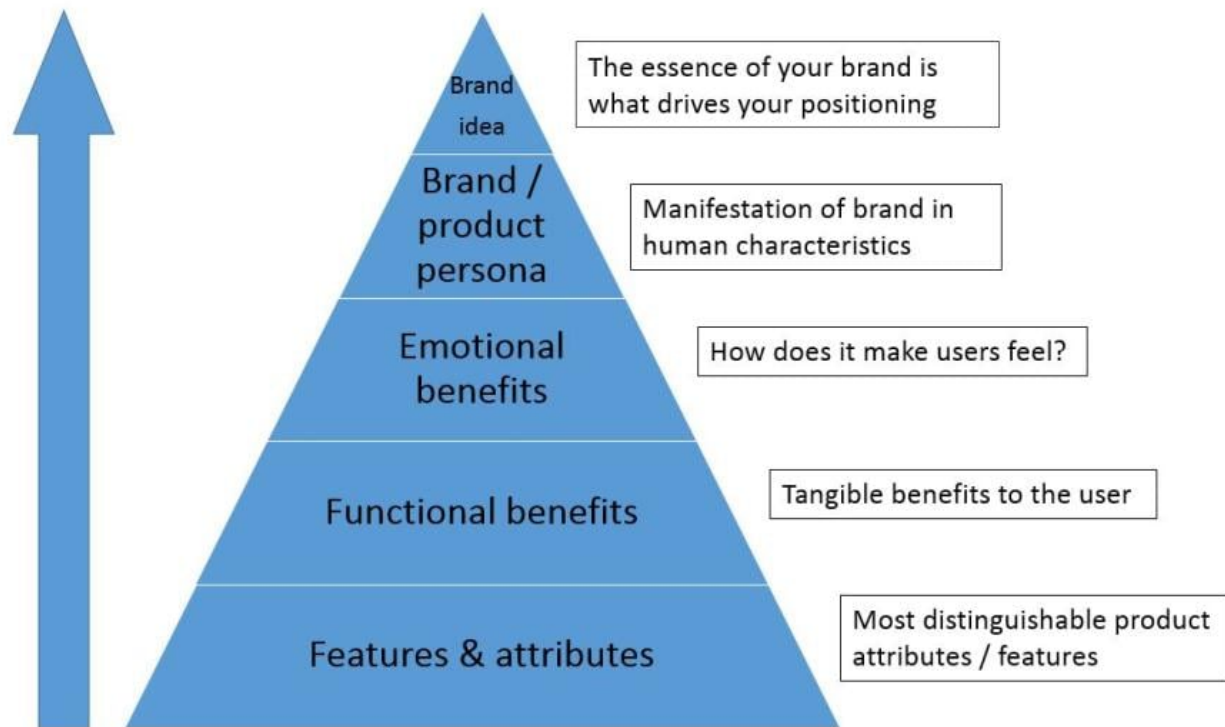
A brand pyramid to gain clarity

A brand pyramid is a framework that answers most of the fundamental questions in a diagram that can be easily shared and communicated across an organisation. The only thing it doesn't tackle directly is the question related to the company's mission and vision (although the brand essence is a direct result of the company's vision).

Far from a trivial exercise, developing a brand pyramid forces consensus among senior management with regards to what the company wants to be, who it serves, why, how it should make customers feel and what the company's core values are. It also clarifies brand fundamentals and sets the strategic foundation. In short, a brand pyramid keeps everyone rowing in the same direction.

What does a brand pyramid look like?

The brand pyramid is comprised of five components, from the base to top:



Features and attributes: This describes what the product is designed to do and how it does it.

Functional benefits: This section helps provide clarity around the customer problem the product tries to solve. Why do customers use the product and what kind of results do they expect?

Emotional benefits: How do customers feel after using the product? Customers aren't just interested in your product features; they want you to tell them a story. They want your product to make them feel a little bit better.

Brand or product persona: If your brand were a person, how would you describe him or her? What are the values that are important to this person and to your company? How does everything you do – from product development to customer service – reinforce these core values?

Brand idea: Your brand essence, or the underlying reason why customers care about your brand. For example, Apple's brand essence is "empowering people through technology". Brand essence is your brand's DNA, what your company stands for and what differentiates it from your competition.

What a brand pyramid means for marketing

The ultimate goal of your company, and especially of your marketing team, is to get customers to understand, believe in and evangelise your brand essence. The more consumers grasp your brand essence and are willing and eager to share it with others, the stronger that relationship and the less likely they'll switch to a competitor's product. Establishing a brand's essence in the mind of a customer is the "promised land" of marketing and a rarely achieved goal.

The first step is deciding whether you need to develop a new brand pyramid or if your existing one is solid. That's where a brand "audit" comes into play. The simplest way to do this is to interview all the key stakeholders in your company and ask them the list of six questions above. If the answers are consistent and aligned, then your pyramid is strong. If not, you've got some work to do.

Generally, developing your brand pyramid is fairly straightforward (though the larger the company, the more complex and lengthy the process). For an early-stage or mid-sized company (between 10-200 employees), I would suggest the following:

1. Identify the key stakeholders (founders, C-suite, heads of key customer-facing departments).
2. Perform an audit with these stakeholders. It's preferable to have one-on-one interviews. Send them a list of key questions and themes so they come well prepared to the meeting, which should last between 60 and 90 minutes.
3. Gather all the feedback and create a "current state" document that you can present to relevant stakeholders.
4. Set up an initial meeting to share:
 - What a brand pyramid is and why it matters
 - A snapshot of your audit and what it reveals
 - A calendar and overview of what's needed to develop your brand pyramid
5. Conduct a brainstorming meeting with the key stakeholders. The aim is to get them all aligned in terms of what each core component of the brand pyramid is.

6. Develop the first draft of your brand pyramid and present it to the key stakeholders.
7. Gather input and adjust the brand pyramid as needed.
8. Once the stakeholders have signed off on the brand pyramid, present it to the wider company. Depending on the size of your organisation, you could do this at an all-hands meeting and or have members of the marketing team (usually the brand team) present it to all relevant customer-facing teams and team leads.

Keeping the momentum

If your brand pyramid is to become reality as opposed to just a nice diagram, senior management should continuously reinforce your brand essence and core values publicly whenever they have the opportunity.

One way to do that would be to start off each all-hands meeting with a quick recap of your brand essence and values. Another way is to institute quarterly rewards for employees who exemplify your brand values and brand essence through actions and initiatives of their own. [Course Hero](#), a company where I used to work, took this a step farther and developed emoticons that people would use in conversations on Slack whenever a colleague did something that furthered the company's core values.

Building a brand pyramid is essential in getting your senior management on the same page. The brand pyramid is a vital tool to build the foundation for your company's brand strategy. But remember, it's just a tool; building a great brand is all about consistency, focus and patience.

[Patrick 'Mad' Mork](#) (INSEAD MBA '00J) is an Executive Coach & Chief Storyteller at *madmork stories*. He is a former Google Play Chief Marketing Officer.

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About the author(s)

Patrick 'Mad' Mork Patrick 'Mad' Mork (INSEAD MBA '00J) is an Executive Coach and the Chief Storyteller at madmork stories.