8 tips to future-proof your brand

**Expert Guide**

How do you ensure that your brand drives superior business value in a rapidly changing world?

We explore how advancements in technology are impacting brand management for leading global companies and outline practical steps to address key challenges on the horizon.
Your organisation’s brand brings business value far beyond the marketing or communications department. This guide’s purpose is to provide the necessary tools and insights to enable better brand management and coherent implementation across your organisation.

What is this guide for?

What will you get out of this guide?

In this guide you will learn about:

• The five most influential technologies
• The unique opportunities and challenges that these technologies bring to brand management
• How industry leaders from around the world are responding to this change
• Eight practical tips to future-proof your brand
Why is it important to future-proof your brand?

Welcome to the future: five technological developments and their impact on branding

8 tips to future-proof your brand

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Why is it important to future-proof your brand?

Your brand is your organisation’s most important intangible asset. It generates both competitive advantage and shareholder value and, on average, accounts for 18% of the market value of an organisation. Despite this, good brand management is not always prioritised, even though research has shown that brand performance improves when a brand is well-organised.

Organisations that do not invest enough in their brand are not future-proof. To ensure that it will survive and remain strong, it’s important to have a brand which continuously evolves through technological and social developments and is in keeping with advancements in the wider world. A well thought out strategy, extensive insight and good management are crucial.

Which developments are important to take into account? And how do you create and manage a brand which is future-proof?

“A strong brand is not just another nice-to-have element that manifests itself in good rankings. A strong company brand is essential for business success.”

Karl-Ludwig Kley, Chairman of the Supervisory Board, E.ON and former Chairman of the Executive Board, Merck KGaA

Welcome to the future: five technological developments and their impact on branding

Technology is disruptive to organisations, affecting all aspects of a brand. In Future-Proof Your Brand\(^3\), we identify several innovations which can provide both an opportunity and a challenge for your brand.

\(^3\) Future-Proof Your Brand (2017), Marc Cloosterman & Laurens Hoekstra

“As technology embeds itself deeply into every aspect of our lives, it’s crucial that brands learn how to quickly adapt and adjust while staying true to their identities. A clear identity has the power to align all functions of the organisation. In this context, the brand becomes a reference point that connects, engages, and brings purpose and meaning.”

Ralph Hamers, CEO and Chairman Executive Board, ING Group
1. The rise of 5G

What is it?

Be prepared: 5G, the fifth generation in mobile networks, is on its way. Besides being 50 to 100 times faster than 4G, it’s especially significant because it means bandwidth will no longer be a limitation - the problem of insufficient data speed will be gone, forever.
What does this mean for your brand?

An increasing amount of data and high-speed connections will have a huge influence on the user experience (UX); the way in which your customers collect information and purchase your products, and the services themselves. Your customers expect simple ‘click-and-buy systems’, fast delivery times and an immediate response.

The fact that there will be much more data available and more access to it, means more insight than ever into the customer journey and the possibility to perfectly align your brand experience with your (potential) customers. Data analysis and interpretation have not yet been included in the working methods of most strategic marketing and communications departments when it comes to brand, but this will change.
2. Artificial intelligence (AI) & machine learning (ML)

What is it?

Whilst privacy is important, our data is increasingly being gathered and technology is getting smarter. Think about services like Google Now or Amazon Recommendations. Patterns in search behaviour, purchases, location and the actions of other users are automatically analysed to provide tailor-made services for customers.
“Increasingly, we are seeing artificial intelligence coming through in brand interactions with audiences, particularly with inbound customer contact moments like Chatbots handling a customer service/FAQ service. It is critical that organisations consider how this impacts their brand through understanding stakeholders’ feelings and psychological motivations, as well the hard data gathered. What are you doing to put in place checks and balances against your brand to ensure that each AI interaction is not only meaningful, but handled in a ‘trusted’ way?”

Jo Davies,
Managing Director, VIM Group

What does this mean for your brand?

AI and ML make it possible to better tailor and personalise your products and services to the needs of your customer. Take Google Maps as an example: it automatically informs you about how long your trip will take based on your location history. As a brand owner, this means you will receive more insight into how people interact with your brand and this offers lots of opportunities to increasingly interweave your brand into the daily life of your customers. At the same time, it also offers challenges – how does this impact on your brand organisation? How do you distinguish yourself from other brands? You can read more on this in our ‘8 tips’ later in this guide.
The Internet of Things (IoT) covers all devices that are connected via the internet. Examples of this are connected home devices, where you can set your thermostat remotely on the way home so that you come home to a warm house. This doesn't just apply to computers and smartphones, but also things like electrical devices at home and in-car. The IoT will only continue to grow and all devices with a sensor will be able to be connected.
First of all, the IoT means that it’s possible to collect more data and use it to improve your products and services. It also means more transparency for your brand, which results in products and/or services becoming less separated from each other. An organisation is the brand, which means that communication and brand experience must start from within - the people within the organisation advertise the brand. In addition, the feeling that people associate with your brand is becoming increasingly important. A strong reputation is driven by relevance and an authentic ‘brand purpose’, and people will become aware of this.

What does this mean for your brand?
4. Digital reality: *virtual* reality (VR), *augmented* reality (AR) & *mixed* reality (MR)

What are they?

At the moment, these technologies are mainly still being explored and defined in the entertainment/gaming industry, but they will become more and more relevant for daily life. The possibility of creating digital realities is increasing. Virtual reality cinemas have been launched all over the world and when you consider the hype of Pokémon Go and the IKEA app, which makes it possible to see the sofa you want to buy in your own living room, it shows that brands are also exploring the possibilities of digital reality.
What does this mean for your brand?

The rise of VR, AR and MR means that new, creative brand experiences are possible. These developments offer lots of new opportunities to challenge your traditional customer journey. One of the most important is the opportunity to offer a versatile, multi-sensory experience for your customers. In contrast, a banner or TV advert only reaches one or two senses. The impact of 4D and 5D experiences are much stronger and last longer. This results in increased brand involvement and brand loyalty.

New digital realities also make it possible for your visitors to remotely experience your brand, meaning you need less physical points-of-sale. This can be seen in the adoption of new start-ups, who only offer their product online, or in combination with a few concept stores. AR also makes it possible to extend the physical buying experience with digital support.
Example in practice:

“The most important concept for our customer, BMW, is based on creating multi-sensory brand experiences. You’re drawn to the entrance, hear the brand music, see the brand film and the (artificial) breeze blows around you. You are then greeted by a BMW brand genius, a true product expert who does everything they can to further enhance your brand experience. A true 4-dimensional interaction with the customer, who experiences all of these senses all at once and which really resonates with them. As we now know, purchases of most luxury products are not done with the head, but primarily with the heart.”

Marc Cloosterman, CEO, VIM Group and author of *Future-Proof Your Brand*
Voice control of devices is becoming more important in our lives. Devices with digital assistants, such as Alexa, Cortana and Siri are growing in usage. Gartner expects that in 2020, as many as 30% of online searches will be done via voice search. What does this mean for your marketing and perhaps even more importantly, your long-term brand strategy?


Did you know that in 2020 it’s expected that as many as 30% of online searches will be done via voice search? (Gartner, 2016)
What does this mean for your brand?

For brand owners, the increase in the use of voice-controlled devices might have major consequences, and the customer journey for most products and services will radically change. A consumer will make an increasingly less conscious choice to buy your brand, with devices choosing for them, probably based on previous purchases or preset preferences.

As a brand owner, it’s important to find new ways to integrate brand experience into the customer journey. Assess the impact of the rise of voice control on your brand, map the changes in the customer journey and accept that you must change things in your marketing and brand strategy. Anticipate the growth of voice search and its impact on your SEO strategy, and consider whether it’s useful to develop your own brand voice.

“The capabilities and ambition of companies like Amazon, Apple, Sonos and Google, combined with the preferences of younger user groups for interaction via voice interfaces, mean that companies are going to have to give increasing consideration to their corporate voice/audio branding strategy, to ensure that they can compete in a world with less screen reliance.”

John Bache, Managing Director Germany, VIM Group
Even though brand seems to disappear into the background with all these technological developments, branding is becoming even more important in creating awareness and influencing consumer preferences. Brands can reach their target groups in new ways, but every innovation also brings its challenges.

As a brand owner, you must ensure that you’re ready for the future. This sounds easier said than done, so that’s why we’re giving you eight tips to follow so that you can immediately start to future-proof your brand. These are based on best practices from our own experience, as well as the vision of a number of inspiring brand managers from our client organisations.

8 tips to future-proof your brand
Tip 1. Be a **pioneer**

When there is so much change around you, it can be tempting to bury your head in the sand, but doing so might mean you miss out. Respond quickly to changes, especially when it comes to branding. Be curious, not hesitant, and don’t write off new technologies and trends too quickly just because you think they won’t survive or they seem irrelevant. Open yourself to new innovations and be flexible.

Keep **distinguishing** yourself from ‘the rest’

With the quantity of information that we receive today, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to capture the attention of your target group. It’s therefore paramount that you continue to distinguish yourself. Don’t wait too long when thinking about experimenting with technological developments, because if these suddenly take off, you may be left far behind your competition.

Set up an **agile** brand organisation

In a world which is constantly changing, it’s important to respond quickly and stay relevant. You therefore need to focus on creating an agile brand organisation. Discover how technological developments can change and reinforce your customer journey, the interaction with your brand and even your brand experience and perception. Quickly move onto the next trend when something doesn’t work for you.
“In an era of Digital Darwinism, branding is key. It’s all about organisations that manage to be agile and adaptive. Gut feeling can help, but strong in-depth knowledge about branding and the ability to adapt is the foundation for success.”

John van Ent, CEO Spar Holding, Chairman Papendal Holding, Boardroom Advisor, former CEO, V&D/La Place Group
Tip 2. Stay **true** to your authentic brand story

What does your brand really mean to your organisation? There are enough brand managers who have difficulty answering this question, which isn’t surprising when you consider how many different opinions there are on what ‘brand’ actually is. Does it represent tangible assets with your logo on them? Is it your tone-of-voice? You’ll find that the brand extends to more than that. A brand must be the expression of the ‘authentic story’ behind your organisation. It must stand for something, including its right to exist: the reason why your organisation matters.

“Brand is about identification and differentiation. A clear and distinctive brand is one that is able to tell a story that sticks in your mind and gives a company an advantage in the marketplace.”

**Axel Löber, Global Head of Corporate Branding & Strategic Communication Projects, Merck KGaA**
Our Brand Performance Study, shows that only 7% of organisations use brand as a starting point for all their business actions. The same study also shows that organisations which see their brand as a strategic starting point have a better (brand) performance.

Bring the brand into the boardroom

The brand isn’t something which is only thought about by the marketing and communications departments, it’s far too important for that. Bring the brand back to where it belongs: close to the business strategy. The brand belongs in the boardroom and must be the starting point for all business actions in the organisation.

Embrace the ‘purpose’ in your brand, but remain authentic

Future-proofing your brand also means that you’re staying close to its core - the ‘authenticity’ and strength of your brand. Relatively young organisations are often very good at this, but if your organisation has been running for a longer period of time, it’s good to go back to your roots. What is your purpose? Can you also fulfill it? Increasingly, organisations which take a totally new path end up formulating a goal that’s too far from their reach. Consumers can quickly tell when an organisation is not sincere, which means you need to bring your brand and your business strategy closer together. If you do this, then your brand is always future-proofed and is unlikely to fail.

“Brands still act as a lightning rod for consumer decisions in a world where there has been trust erosion and I believe brand has never been more important.”

Marc Evans, Marketing Director, Direct Line Group
Tip 3. **Brand analytics**: make your brand performance measurable

In the introduction we mentioned that on average the brand represents 18% of an organisation’s value. However, many organisations are not clear on the exact value of their brand. The boardroom expects hard data, especially when there needs to be investment in the brand.

“Data plays an increasingly important role in marketing and communications. You also need to make your brand performance measurable. A good brand dashboard is an excellent tool for this. In addition, it’s important that you continue to learn and experiment with what works and know what does not work to continue to develop the brand.”

Laurens Hoekstra, CSO, VIM Group and author of *Future-Proof Your Brand*
Optimise your brand, based on insight

To ensure a brand is future-proof, you need insight into the value of the brand and how various channels and brand touch points contribute to overall brand performance. This isn’t just for mapping the impact of the brand but, more importantly, for making the right choices in step-by-step optimisation of your brand strategy.

Convince internal stakeholders to invest in the brand

It’s difficult to provide insight into the value that a brand provides to an organisation. The focus is therefore often on marketing activities, which provide direct conversion and leads for sales. Yet the effect of a strong brand in the long term is often worth much more. By giving insight into the performance of your brand for internal stakeholders, it becomes easier to create a wider reason for investing in your brand. These investments are needed to make and keep your brand future-proof.
VIM Group’s Brand Dashboard provides real-time insight into brand analytics. It merges data from various tools, systems and channels into one central place. This provides the opportunity to focus your brand activities, optimise your brand and ultimately increase your brand value.

vim-group.com/brand-dashboard
Ten years ago, it was believed that consistent application of the corporate identity across all communications was key to having a strong brand. However, today the emphasis is much more on conveying one coherent and convincing brand promise. This is about flexibility in applying the corporate style, rather than a strict requirement that all communication looks the same.

Tip 4. **Encourage brand coherency, instead of enforcing consistency**

“We will need more than just rigid corporate design manuals to be successful. Flexible design systems are required that can be adapted to the specific context or partnership. Obsessive consistency will not be the way forward, but rather a coherent brand presence will lead the way, in terms of form and content.”

**Alexander Engelhardt, Vice President Brand Management, Deutsche Telekom AG**

“I would like to see brand management in the coming years move away from acting as the ‘brand police’ and shifting towards empowering users by making sure they understand the value of the brand. It’s not just about providing some guidelines and a ‘go with it’ attitude, but creating enough education around how important the brand is so people can use it in a respectful way and in a certain framework of freedom.”

**Nathalie Quéré, Director of Brand and Creative Services, AkzoNobel**
Put an end to the ‘corporate style police’

The shift from consistency to coherency means that brand touch points no longer need to have exactly the same visual layout, as long as every touch point feels the same and communicates the same core elements. The role of the corporate identity police, who checked every advertisement on the basis of traditional brand guidelines, seems to be a thing of the past. The role of the brand manager has evolved into that of empowerment to oversee all brand communications so they create an unambiguous brand experience between online and offline touch points.

Customise your brand organisation

Community thinking is becoming more important in the world of branding. Through digitisation, there is more interaction with your brand from employees, customers, and users. You don’t want to slow down this process. Organisations must become faster, more effective and more flexible and, with this, brand management must become more dynamic as having a fixed set of rules in place for your organisation won’t work. The building blocks of brands have changed, and there needs to be a shift to structure brand tools and elements in flexible ‘Lego boxes’, which employees themselves can mix and match.
Tip 5. Experiment with the **flexibility of your brand** and relevant partnerships

Consumers’ perceptions are changing rapidly. Think of the ‘one-stop-shops’; where you do your daily shopping, drink coffee with a friend and also go for your monthly haircut. The consumer’s world is driven by convenience and speed and brands need to respond quickly to this.

“People no longer search directly for a well-known hotel chain or restaurant, they search through intermediaries. If you do not watch out, you will be overtaken or overshadowed by this kind of smart intermediary. That is why you have to move with what the customer needs and continue to build a strong brand.”

Rutger Hamelynck, Head of Brand Management, NS
**Stretch your brand**

Brands like Amazon have been successful in stretching into different domains. Although brand ‘stretching’ can be risky, to remain relevant you need to continue to explore possibilities. Experiment with new brands and partnerships, because in the future it will become increasingly important to serve a broader market.

**Make sure you remain relevant**

There are now more brands in the market which play an intermediary role. They don’t always offer products or services themselves, but offer overarching services. Examples include Trivago and Deliveroo. These are all well-known brands which have taken a strong position between customer and supplier and can themselves demand attention. To ensure you do not become completely dependent on this kind of intermediary, make sure that you are relevant for your individual brand and are familiar with your audience; now and in the future. That way you can prevent only competing on price.
Tip 6. Say goodbye to the ‘silhouette’

Brands are frequently still organised in silos. Think of marketing, communications, facilities, IT, HR and UX. These departments have a lot of involvement with the brand, but rarely share best practices and experiences. This needs to change. Encourage communication between parties and ensure that the brand remains a topic of conversation. Collaboration is crucial for a coherent brand experience across all brand touch points.

“In an age of democratisation, the role of the brand manager is changing towards one of a brand community or relationship manager: one who has conversations with stakeholders and tries to influence brand development, instead of just having rules in place and making sure that these rules are applied and adhered to.”

Axel Löber, Global Head of Corporate Branding & Strategic Communication Projects, Merck KGaA
From **brand governance** to **brand collaboration**

Which department owns the brand? This is a question which will become less relevant in the future as fixed structures are broken down. This won’t be just between separate positions and different specialisms within the marketing department, but also outside of it. Think wider. You will work together, with the brand flowing through the channels of the organisation at every level.

**Designate brand ambassadors throughout the company**

Because the brand is present throughout the organisation, it’s also wise to have ‘brand ambassadors’ across various disciplines who monitor whether the core message of your brand is communicated in the right way. It’s vital you train this core team of ambassadors well and keep them up-to-date by meeting regularly.
Tip 7. Get the **right expertise**

A brand does not stand still. As we have mentioned before, social and technological developments affect the brand landscape at lightning speed. To ensure that your brand is always future-proof, you need the right expertise at your disposal. You can develop this expertise within your own talent pool, but it’s also advisable to use external help, especially when your brand planning changes.

**Who is responsible for your brand?**

You may work on the brand with a lot of people within your organisation, but who is responsible for your brand at a strategic, tactical and operational level? The corporate communications manager often has final responsibility within many structures, and agencies are hired when it comes to brand strategy and design. But what is the right choice when it comes to the implementation and management of your brand? And is there enough focus on the brand? If not, it is time to change this and appoint a dedicated brand manager.
Take on people who already fit your brand values

The brand is propagated by your employees, not only in the marketing and communications departments, but throughout the company and beyond. If you want to convey the right message, then you have to start from within. This begins with attracting the right people: employees who fit your brand values. Have you ever thought about your current and future employer branding?

“In the near future, the marketing function will take place in new forms which means the marketing department will no longer operate separately from the rest of the organisation. The work of marketing won’t disappear, but will be organised in a different way. Marketing professionals will remain specialists and broaden their knowledge whilst working much more closely with IT and other disciplines within the organisation.”

Nanne Bos, Head of Global Brand Management, ING Group
Tip 8. **Define** how you want to **organise your brand** in the future

Despite the obvious value in brands, in practice we often see little attention paid to properly shaping them. Moreover, changes in technology mean that we have to redefine what the brand organisation looks like. Dialogue and interaction must be facilitated, while establishing the DNA of the brand across all touch points.

**Good organisation** of the brand is an **ongoing process**

Constant investment in your brand and good brand management are important for the long-term success of the brand. This is not a one-off process, but a life-cycle as the brand continues to develop. Managing your brand is therefore a continuous process, with the aim of continuing to optimise brand experiences and brand values.

**Focus** the brand **on the organisation**

The tips in this guide should help you manage your brand better. The starting point, and at the same time the most important success factor, for a strong brand is that it gets attention from the organisation. From onboarding and e-learning to an internal branding programme, each of these activities must contribute to more knowledge and understanding of the brand. Practical tools like brand portals and brand management platforms for organising the brand are becoming increasingly popular, so make use of them!
Want to know more?

A strong brand which is future-proof is absolutely essential in ensuring your organisation remains relevant in a diverse and growing brand landscape. Hopefully, the tips in this guide will help you to optimise the performance of your brand, for the present and for the future.

Do you have specific issues regarding brand management and future-proofing your brand? Do you want to find out how VIM Group can support you with these challenges? Contact us:

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Get more tips in the book

Future-Proof Your Brand

Would you like to know more about how to future-proof your brand? In 2017, Marc Cloosterman and Laurens Hoekstra published Future-Proof Your Brand. It provides a clear overview of considerations and processes which are involved in changing and improving a brand.

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vim-group.com/future-proof
VIM Group has been bringing structure, control and efficiency to the world of brands since 1991. Every day our specialists help many brands - large and small - to fulfill their promise. As a founder of the brand management field, VIM Group provides independent experience and knowledge for more than 1,000 clients and projects. The focus is on supervising brand transitions: the implementation and management of the brand across all touch points, both digitally and offline.