

## The startup brand-building route map

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*Here are four factors that startups need to keep in mind, to take off well and stay in the air*



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Before we look at how to build startups as a brand, we need to answer one critical question: What is a startup? The obvious answer is that it is a business enterprise that has just come into being and is looking at explosive growth. But a startup in reality is not just a new business that has come into being.

A startup is more than just a new business that has taken wing.

A startup is a business enterprise that is working to solve a problem, using technology as an enabling tool and where success is not guaranteed.

Uber is a startup because it applied technology to the logistics business, Amazon because it applied technology to warehouses and storefronts, Little in India (a hyperlocal deal-based app) is a startup as it is bringing a lot of offline shops onto an online platform for consumers to interact with in real time.

A key attribute of a startup is its ability to grow exponentially.

At the end of the day, a startup is about solving a consumer problem through innovation and technology.

Innovation and technology do not automatically promise a fledgling enterprise and runaway growth. Many startups shut down despite the best of intentions, technology and sometimes a pool table in office. How are the ones that become successful different from ones that are not so successful? Here are four markers that can help in the journey.

### Who are you?

Startups need to spend an enormous amount of time and energy to get their name correct. I was once told by a startup's co-founder that "we are all engineers, we think rationally and we named our company from that perspective." Think again.

The name is the most critical element of a startup. Amazon is not a name, it's a promise to sell everything from A to Z. The name has no rational logic. Neither do eBay, Uber, Jabong, Monster or Spotify, yet they are names that define the category they operate in.

The name is the single biggest asset that the startup will own. If the name is crafted with rationality in mind, someone who is smarter or is better funded will usurp it.

A cleverly chosen name will stand and help the startup grow at breakneck speed, and become an entry barrier for everyone who wants to copy the successful formula. That brings me to the second point.

### How do you look?

Standing out in a vastly cluttered environment is a tough challenge for any startup. By definition, a startup is a new idea; the need for the service or product has to be established. The first place where the consumer is likely to interact with the brand is at the small screen of mobile phones. The visual definition of the brand needs to be sharp, given the small real estate that exists on the screen. Today the brand advertises on the mobile screen much earlier than it does on any paid medium offline or online. The investment in visual code becomes the anchor for customers to know you. A strong visual signature creates a distinct identity and makes the wider audience fall in love with the brand. Remember the brand is the little tile on the mobile phone, and that has to be a potent symbol.

### What do you have to say?

Any startup, when it starts, looks at the world differently. It is not the usual take on the solution it offers the consumers. Born out of innovation, the startup has to craft a powerful story to tell. Uber's promise of being 'everyone's private driver' crafts a potent story about what the brand offers. Jabong does not want to be a discount retailer; it wants to be the leader in fashion conversation. An export house, when it applied technology to its ability to manufacture high-quality garments, did not craft the appeal based on price, it crafted its appeal based on its global expertise. Oxolloxo, a quirky fashion brand, is about the colours of the world.

Startups' stories have tremendous power to connect with new-age consumers, who themselves are looking beyond the traditional ways of connecting with brands.

### What's your focus?

Never succumb to the temptation of being everything to everyone. That is extremely difficult to achieve. I know there are examples of a few startups wanting to be exactly this, but if you look at their history, they were focused at the start. To succeed, be brutal, sacrifice the peripheral to focus on the core consumer and offer an experience to remember. Focus on a few loyal bands of fans and followers, the world will come to you for that one value.

Branding for startups is not about an expensive media campaign. The campaign can wait till you go through the branding journey. Advertising can be prohibitively expensive, but done right, can be the difference between long-term success and being seen just as a shooting star.

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