

WHAT IS BRAND SPRAWL?

(and what to do about it)

AUTHOR

SHO R&D

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Introduction

Brand sprawl may be a term you're not familiar with but you've probably experienced it at some point. At work, have you ever spent hours looking for the latest version of a marketing asset? As a consumer, have you ever noticed a disjointed visual experience with a brand depending on whether you see it in a TV ad, in-store ad, or digital ad? **Brand sprawl is the messy, uncontrolled spread of unapproved branded materials by both internal and external parties that occurs naturally as a business grows.** Although the term may be relatively new, the concept has been plaguing businesses for decades. As content creation has become easier and more democratized, it can become more difficult for Brand Managers to reign in all the variations of approved assets floating around out there.



Brand Sprawl visualized at JFK Airport

Symptoms of Brand Sprawl

From our years of working with brands to help them create beautiful experiences, we've seen countless examples of how brand sprawl presents itself within a business. Here are some of the most common symptoms of brand sprawl.



1. It takes forever to find your digital assets

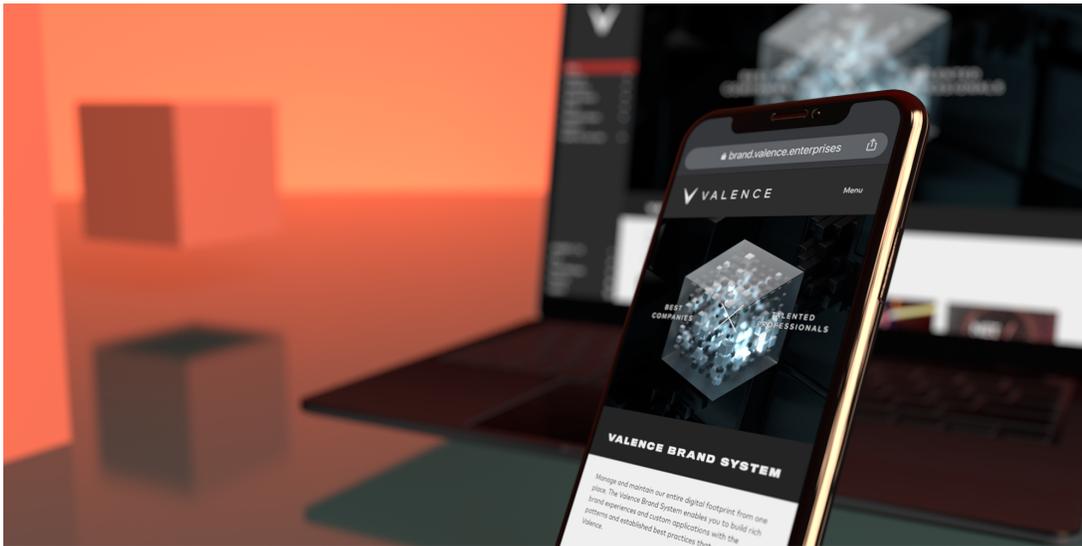
Remember that amazing asset that was created four months ago? Where the heck did that go?!? Searching through emails, Dropbox, your local storage, Google Drive, Teams or Slack and still can't find it? Keep searching, it's always the last place you look. In addition to this being frustrating beyond belief, it is a clear sign that there needs to be some additional organization around how brand assets are distributed and stored.

2. Design is a bottleneck for new products

Is your dev team writing code or waiting for designs to be developed and perfected before they can begin building that new product or website? A slow design process can drastically slow down your company's ability to react fast and capitalize on market opportunities. In many cases, delays are more due to the fact that designers are trying to wrangle the latest and greatest standards and assets than some kind of creative "writer's block".

3. You see outdated or inconsistent assets in circulation

Companies often circulate outdated marketing materials without even knowing it. As frustrating as this can be, it is rarely done maliciously. People tend to pull down a PDF file, save it locally, and then share it for years to come. Over one-fourth of the sales team in this study often or always create content without waiting for marketing to do it ([source](#)). When different departments or teams are in charge of creating branding materials, it can be difficult to maintain a consistent voice. Moreover, there may not be a standardized way to store these branded assets. This can lead to inconsistency and confusion among customers.



4. Creating new branded material takes too long

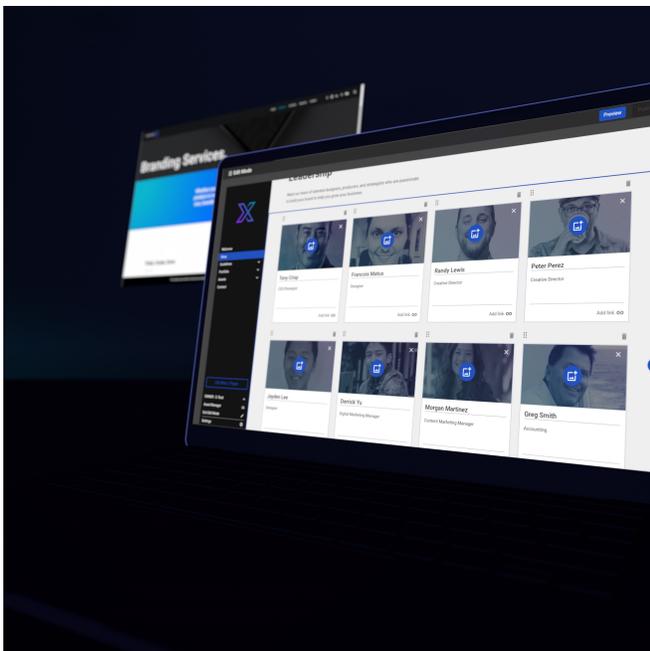
In today's world, speed to market with content is critical. If you have a brilliant idea for an Instagram post, it can't take days or weeks to have that content created for distribution. This can lead to missed opportunities and decreased efficiency. In addition, it can be difficult to keep track of all of the different branding materials that are being used because branded assets are distributed weeks or months after they were requested.

5. Rebrand is nearly impossible to wrap your arms around

The CEO just announced to the team a total rebrand is coming. How exciting! And then, how terrifying! The thought of a rebrand goes from excitement to terror in a heartbeat once you realize how many old assets are out there that will need to be updated once the new style guide is determined. Print, digital, websites, marketing content, email signatures, the list goes on and on. This can be a pretty daunting (and expensive) task.

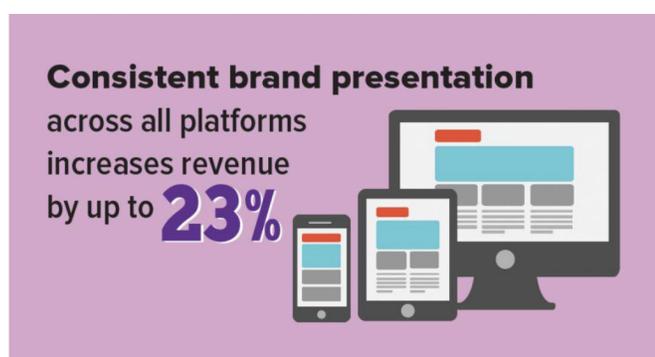
6. Your brand lacks consistency across web, mobile, print, partners, etc.

When it comes to creating your brand identity across multiple platforms/ touchpoints/ channels, you probably rely on a handful of trusted resources, employees, partners, agencies, vendors, consultancies, etc. When you distribute your brand guidelines to them, you are sharing a static document. Any changes to those guidelines, no matter how subtle, will require each of those trusted resources to make changes to their work. That rarely happens. *Content fragmentation – a lack of consistency in expressing branding and key messages – is a reality for almost one-fourth of study participants.* Content’s impact on revenue is diminished when it is fragmented (source).



Impact of Brand Sprawl

So, now that we have an understanding of what brand sprawl is and how it presents itself within a business, the next question is how does this impact my business. Well, according to a study, *presenting a brand consistently across all platforms can increase revenue by up to 23%* (source). What impact does brand sprawl have on my overall brand identity and ultimately how my business is perceived in the market?



via Forbes

The customer experience varies across your company

As brand sprawl gets worse, the experience your customers have with your brand becomes inconsistent. Someone who finds your brand on social media may have a different experience than someone who finds your brand in digital ads, or on television, or in print. The truth is, not all consumers will notice subtle differences but nonetheless it is impactful. In fact, according to a study, *77% of respondents say they've seen outdated content in circulation* (source).

The bigger the brand, the bigger the problem

As companies and brands grow, so grows their brand sprawl challenge. More partners, more products, and more customers means more brand interactions to reign in and align. It's nearly an impossible task. What makes this even more difficult is that businesses typically spend money on this problem in a reactive way rather than proactively to stop or curb the problem. Money spent on brand management usually lags compared to marketing and sales, which is the primary distribution channel for the brand.

Time to market for new brand material suffers

When you want to capitalize on the “current thing”, speed is critical. You definitely don’t want to be the last of your competitors to get something out there. You want to be the leader in the space. This example rings true for something as simple as a social media post and as complex as a new product or service offering.



Causes of Brand Sprawl

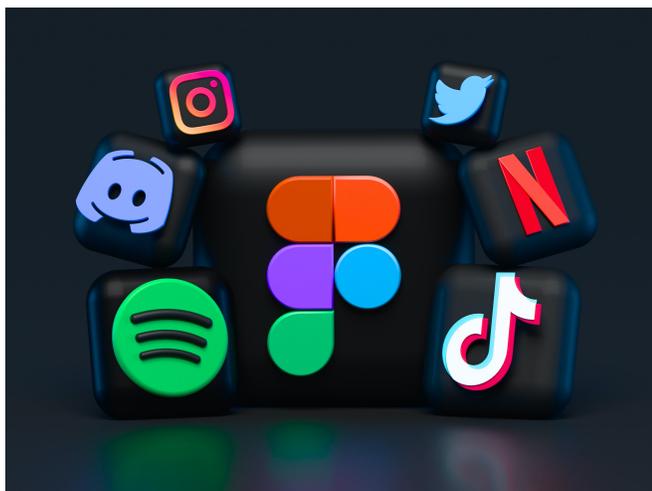
Brand sprawl is a growing pain for a business. Believe it or not, it's actually a good problem to have. It means that your business has been successful enough to grow and sustain itself over time. Unfortunately, brand sprawl is inevitable. You can't completely stop it from happening, you can only hope to contain or curb it. If you're experiencing some of the symptoms listed above, it doesn't mean that you did something wrong. It is a natural growing pain for businesses of all shapes and sizes.

Company and brand growth

It is completely natural for brand sprawl to become a problem as a business grows. The more broadly you distribute your brand the more likely you are to rely on third parties to help. You may have another company helping you with your social media, or getting media attention, or writing content, or even with content distribution. As your company grows, locking down your brand will get more difficult because there will inevitably be *"too many cooks in the kitchen"*. Even as you hire more employees, control of your brand becomes a challenge.

Longevity of the brand

The longer your brand lives, the more updated your brand needs to be. Even subtle changes over time will build up. Your company may have never gone through a formal rebranding process but over the course of several years and making minor changes here and there, your brand can have a very different look and feel as time passes.



Shorter attention span of consumers requires more frequent touchpoints

Today, brands are required to do a lot more than they were even a few years ago. Consumers are constantly being bombarded with content from thousands of brands per day and the typical customer journey has an average of just over five touch points, with 20% of study participants reporting seven or more touches ([source](#)). To compete in this saturated market, brands are required to produce more content and assets than ever before. This need for quantity has made it harder for brands to police quality.

Potential solutions to curb brand sprawl

Although it can't be completely stopped, there are several ways to mitigate the impacts of brand sprawl within your business. They range from complex and expensive to simple and easy to implement. These potentially solutions can be paired together to do even more to limit brand sprawl.

Digital Asset Management Software

Digital Asset Management or DAM software is a place for you to store and share approved branded assets. These platforms are great once you have a large portfolio of assets that need to be organized and shared with your brand stakeholders. When used properly, a DAM becomes the single source of truth for brand assets. The problem with a DAM is that it does not assist with the content creation process. Instead, a DAM just alleviates the storage and distribution symptoms.

Content Management System

This is a software that provides a framework that designers and marketers and developers can use to build web pages with assets and content that live within a DAM or some other storage and distribution mechanism. A CMS is typically used to manage web pages full of digital content. By using a CMS instead of hard coding web pages that require a developer to make even minor changes to your web pages, it allows you to be more nimble with updates to your website.

Brand Guidelines

The easiest way to limit brand sprawl is to create brand guidelines and distribute them to your brand stakeholders. According to research, *15% of companies have no brand guidelines at all and 13% have guidelines that go unused (source)*. Brand guidelines will typically include things such as logo variations, typefaces, colors, and other key brand components that can be used by designers, developers, partners, etc. The problem with guidelines is that they are usually distributed via a non-interactive PDF file that becomes out of date quickly once any minor changes are made.

Outsource Brand Management

One way to curb brand sprawl is to completely outsource the management of your brand to a third party. This can work really well if you don't have the resources to manage a brand internally. There are a ton of really great agencies out there that specialize in creating and managing beautiful brands. The challenges with outsourcing this critical function of your business is it provides a certain lack of control when it comes to agility if new assets need created or updated. You are subject to the timelines of your agency partner. Agencies come in many shapes and sizes, including a substantial variety in costs. There should always be a consideration when choosing an agency about cost and quality. Remember, you'll get what you pay for with agencies.

Hire more to your brand management team

If you already have an internal team managing your brand, you can always add more heads to your team. Or, hire your first Brand Manager. This is definitely a great way to curb brand sprawl but simply adding people to the team won't alleviate the problem. There will also be additional expenses for tools and processes that the brand management team puts in place.

Build a custom brand system

If you have the financial resources to make it work, owning your own brand system can be incredibly useful to curbing brand sprawl. The challenge here is that building a brand system with an internal team is time consuming and expensive. Outsourcing the development can be wildly expensive. In either case, once the brand system is built it will require constant maintenance and support resources.

Wrap it up

Brand sprawl is a problem that occurs naturally as a business grows. In most cases, it actually can't be stopped, it can only be contained. As brands become more powerful, more people get involved in creating and distributing brand assets which causes brand sprawl to worsen. It is a necessary step in growth. Fortunately, there are several ways to curb brand sprawl that can have an impact in your future growth and success as a brand. By creating brand guidelines and distributing them to stakeholders, outsourcing brand management, hiring more people to your brand management team, or building your own custom brand system, businesses can limit the number of brand assets that are created without centralized control. While each of these methods has its own challenges, they can help keep brand sprawl under control and allow businesses to continue growing and delivering a consistent brand experience to their customers.

About SHO

SHO is on a mission to end brand sprawl and change the way brands bring beauty and clarity to the world. With its unique BrandOS, [SHO.ai](#) enables brands of all sizes to quickly and easily build new brands from scratch, create new branded material, manage existing branded assets, and more by leveraging [SHO.ai](#)'s powerful AI engine that has been trained by some of the brightest minds in brand design. To learn more about Brand Sprawl please visit www.sho.ai.