

2.1 The vision and values

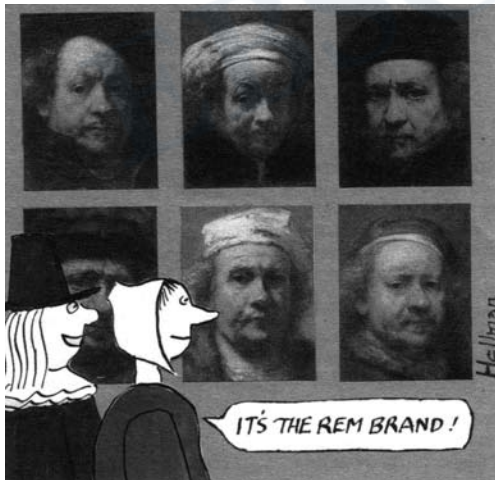
Shan Preddy

You've got to have a dream; if you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?

- Oscar Hammerstein (1898–1960), from 'South Pacific'

WHY YOU NEED A VISION

A business without a vision is a business without direction. Far too many design companies are reactive in their development and, even if they are growing and profitable, they have arrived where they are by accident. How does this happen? Very easily. Opportunities are pursued without enough questions being asked about their usefulness; projects appear from clients and are accepted, whether or not they are a good fit; senior people with specific skills and experience join or leave and this changes the company's capabilities.



Like boats without a destination and without navigation charts, businesses like this are drifting. They might have powerful engines and active crew members, but they are either going nowhere fast or heading for the wrong place. If they are lucky, they ride the high seas on favourable winds and find safe harbours when storms threaten. If they are unlucky, they circle aimlessly and sink without trace. The majority of visionless companies lie somewhere between these extremes, of course. They just dock in ports they don't like, on landmasses they never wanted to visit in the first place.

AND WHAT ABOUT VALUES?

Like nation states and individual people, businesses have values whether or not they are formally stated. Think of any market sector: one retailer, one airline, one

accountancy firm or one architectural practice might have very different values from its competitors, even though some aspects of their vision, such as their commercial goals, might be identical.

Values are simply the things which are important to a business. They will not lightly be compromised, if at all, and they form an integral part of the vision. In some cases, a value can become a business's core proposition to its customers: examples of this would be an ethical, fair-trading stance, or an organic premise, or a no-questions-asked returns policy.

What's important to you right now? What do you think will be important in the future? If you own your firm as well as managing it, your business values will inevitably reflect those you and any co-owners hold in life in general.

THE BENEFIT, AND THE BUILDING BLOCKS

A good vision, and its accompanying values, will allow you to run your business more easily. Once they are in place, everything else – from major to minor decisions you will need to take – follows: finance policies; marketing strategies; recruitment criteria; IT investment; location and style of your workplace; choice of coffee and biscuit brands in the office kitchen.

They will also help you to construct your business strategy and plan. If you don't first lay down the foundations of vision and values, you will be building on quicksand.

Think of it as building blocks. Start with your vision and values and, from them, develop your overall business strategy. What will the business be doing in, say, three or five years' time? If you run a new or small company, or work in a rapidly-changing, emerging market such as digital, two years might be more realistic.

Once the two foundation building blocks of your vision and values and your business strategy are in place, you can work on strategies and plans for the separate elements in your business. Some typical design company elements (finance, product, marketing, people) are shown in Figure 2.1.1; they are explored in detail in the following chapters.

After the separate plans are completed, they can be combined to form your overall three (or five, or two) year business plan.

HOW TO DEFINE YOUR VISION AND VALUES

Get together with your management team and do a bit of imagineering. Think forwards, and then think again. One projective technique you could use is to imagine your company being written about in the press in three (or five, or two) years' time. How would it be described? Another is to imagine a fairy godmother or a genie giving you the wish to create the business exactly as you want it. The wish won't come true without a lot of input from you, but it's a good place to start.

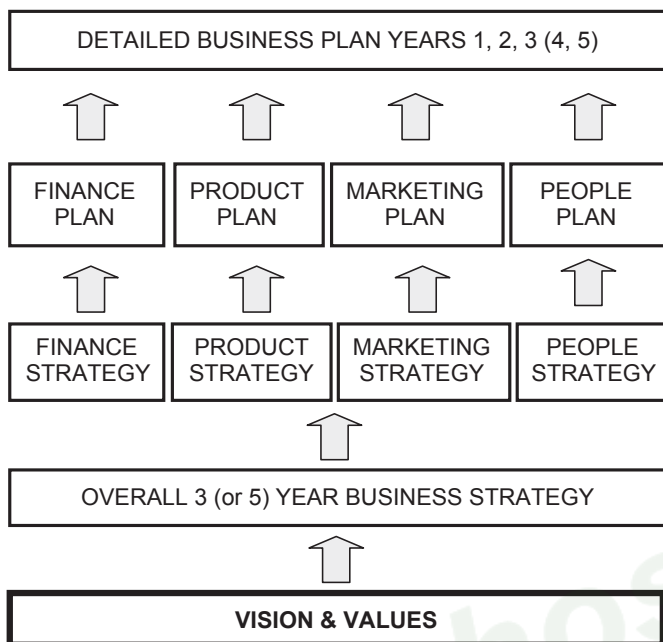


Figure 2.1.1 Strategic building blocks for business development

Source: © PREDDY&CO

To help define your vision, you could consider:

- The finances: what do you want the business's annual fee income and profit to be?
- Geographical location(s): where do you see the business being situated, in the same location as now, or somewhere else, and how many offices might you have?
- The type of work done: will it be the same as now, or different?
- The client list: who will you be doing the work for?
- Staff, if any: numbers, skills, quality, seniority.
- Your own role(s) in the business: what you, personally, will be doing.

To define your values, think about what's important to you; those are the things to work on. You could look at:

- intellectual satisfaction
- award-winning creativity
- maximising profit
- peer group recognition and respect
- market reputation
- brand image and profile

- design effectiveness
- the client sectors you will (or won't) work with
- the quality of client relationships
- your levels of client service
- staff development
- environmental sustainability
- community and charitable activities – design or broader
- leisure time
- fun.

Setting the vision and values for a business is the responsibility of the owner, Partners or Directors. Unless you work alone, it should be a team effort, but only up to a point. Employees, together with any shareholders or investors who are not directly involved in running the firm, only need to be informed – and inspired – once the full business strategy and plans have been developed. Democratic vision-setting-by-committee can be disastrous, leading to division of opinions and resulting in inactivity.

REALITY CHECKS

Once you've drafted your vision and values, you will need to ask yourself whether they are achievable. If necessary, ask a trusted external consultant or expert to work with you. Your vision needs to be ambitious, challenging and, ideally, exciting to the point of being just a little scary. But it also needs to be realistic. Otherwise, you will become frustrated and dispirited if you don't achieve it.

Your vision and values will change when external factors change and when unexpected opportunities or challenges occur. The market, the economy, your competitors and your clients will all influence them. Revisit and confirm them regularly, at least annually and preferably every six months; the newer the business, the more frequently you'll need to do it. In very volatile economic trading environments such as rapid market growth or economic recession, review them monthly.

You can tell if your vision and values are getting a bit murky when you can't describe them easily and convincingly to someone else, or when you just can't get excited about them anymore. And you'll know when they are clear. That's when you are brave enough to turn down work – any work, even the attractive and profitable stuff – which doesn't help you to achieve it. Voyage to Mombasa? No, thanks. This boat's heading for Rio.