



FOSTER YOUR BRAND BEFORE YOUR START-UP HITS PUBERTY

Building a business is like raising a toddler. It's all about priorities. First learn to walk, then to talk, and then to use the potty. Similarly, with startups, first you define your product, business model, then distribution. And for both, character, talent and traits will follow.

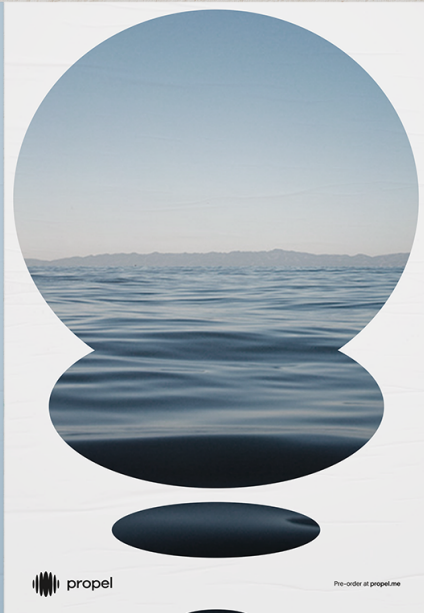
But just like the first 1.000 days are crucial for a child's future health and happiness, it pays off to start building your brand from the moment your business is born. Without giving any binding parenting advice, I'd like to take you through a few reasons why building your brand from the early days will bring a clear return on investment - using our work for electric boat propulsion startup Propel as a reference.

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12^{kw}

Ride the
Electric
Wave

 propel



 propel

the-order-at-propel.me

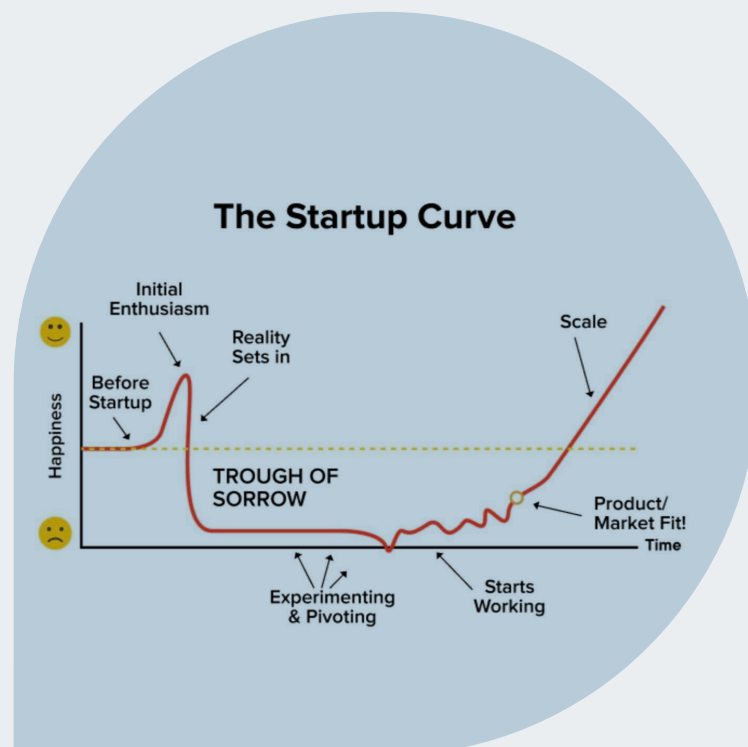


Young kids learn faster

Babies and young children form neural connections at a very rapid pace. As the brain develops, it becomes more specialized, reinforcing the neural pathways that are used most regularly. Generally that's a good thing, because it increases efficiency, but it also makes learning new things more challenging.

That's (partially) why the first 1,000 days of a kid's life matter so much. The same goes for your brand. As shown, the first years normally are quite the ride. But in the early early stages of your business, you have a one of a kind chance to create a clear outline for its respective brand. This will not only help adoption - a small team is easier to guide - but will also be reflected in all future efforts of the organization as a whole. The thinking will be woven into the fabric of your venture, culture and future.

When crafting the brand strategy for Propel, we aimed to mirror the sensory experience of customers on the water in all aspects of the brand. Propel motors enable a more silent and authentic outdoor experience, where you can really feel and appreciate the subtlety of being out boating. That subtlety therefore was a must-have in not only brand design, but also in product design, the webshop, customer service and any other branded touchpoint. And, all new hires adopt this mindset from day 1, as it's all around them. No guidelines needed.





What you feed your little one is what comes out

Fostering the way your team talks about your brand is not about enforcing strict guidelines. It's about them adopting the language that's present around them. Verbal representation of your business is probably the first way your brand will come to life; from explaining the concept at a birthday party to initial talks with investors, and from attracting potential new hires to small talk with your inner circle. Just you, talking. Often without fancy slide decks or videos. Therefore the words you choose matter. These first words will be the words the people you're working with will adopt; people simply use what their peers use. One of the first words the firstborn of my baking-aficionado sister was able to say was... cake. Simply because the word was mentioned regularly around her in her early days.

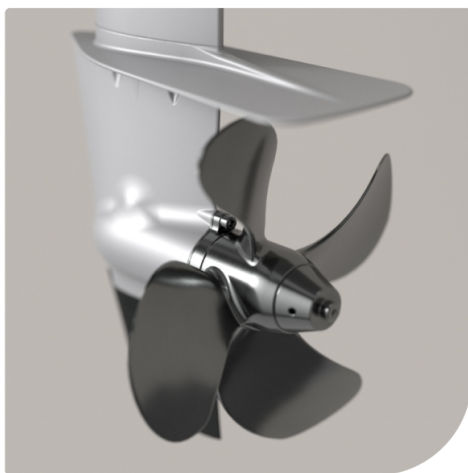
While working on Propel's brand story, I went sailing with a few friends. A handful of them own a small size boat, and would qualify to be in Propel's target audience. A great chance to test the waters with some future customers, right? My first explanation of the project was: 'the VanMoof of boat motors'. Although referring to a brand they know made sense to me - it obviously helps to illustrate the type of brand we wanted Propel to be - but at the same time I lost the opportunity to tell their story. Finding the right words to tell your story, increases the chance others will too. It's about providing them with a clear mental picture and frame of what it is you're building. If you don't come up with it yourself, your team (or even worse; the public) will decide for you - and that's when it's out of your hands.



Clarity creates character

Clear choices in one's upbringing shape one's character. When I was a kid, I considered my parents somewhat strict. For example, I wasn't allowed anything close to a game console. They rather had me playing outside, or reading. Looking back, I believe that formed (some of) the basis for my love of the outdoors and for writing.

The definition of a brand can be broad, but I like to see it as a set of associations that a person (or group) has when confronted with a company, product, service or individual. Investing in a clear brand is investing in a clear preset in people's minds. If you're able to shape that preset by making a clear choice on what you're all about, that will build towards that (positive) association in the long run.



Efficient propulsion

Optimal balance between propeller size and motor performance.





Raise 'em for the real world

Branding is often related to bombastic manifests and unnecessary fluff. And for a reason. Therefore it's essential to think about what matters most when building your brand. Just like you prioritize what to teach your kids. After all, some skills are more important than others.

In Propel's early stage product design, we played around with very outspoken designs. Focussing on people with an eye for design, we figured we needed an attention-grabbing, recognizable product. But soon we realized the boat - not the motor - is the owner's pride and joy, so we toned down the designs to leave the stage to the vessel itself. Resulting in iconic but humble product design.





Babies are a long-term game

Raising children asks for a significant investment, in time and money. But, “you get so much in return”. That doesn’t mean you need to spend a lot of money on your brand from the get-go. The key point here is that you should be in it for the long run. The brand itself will prove to be a valuable asset, but it takes time. Time needed to build that mental preset amongst your audience.

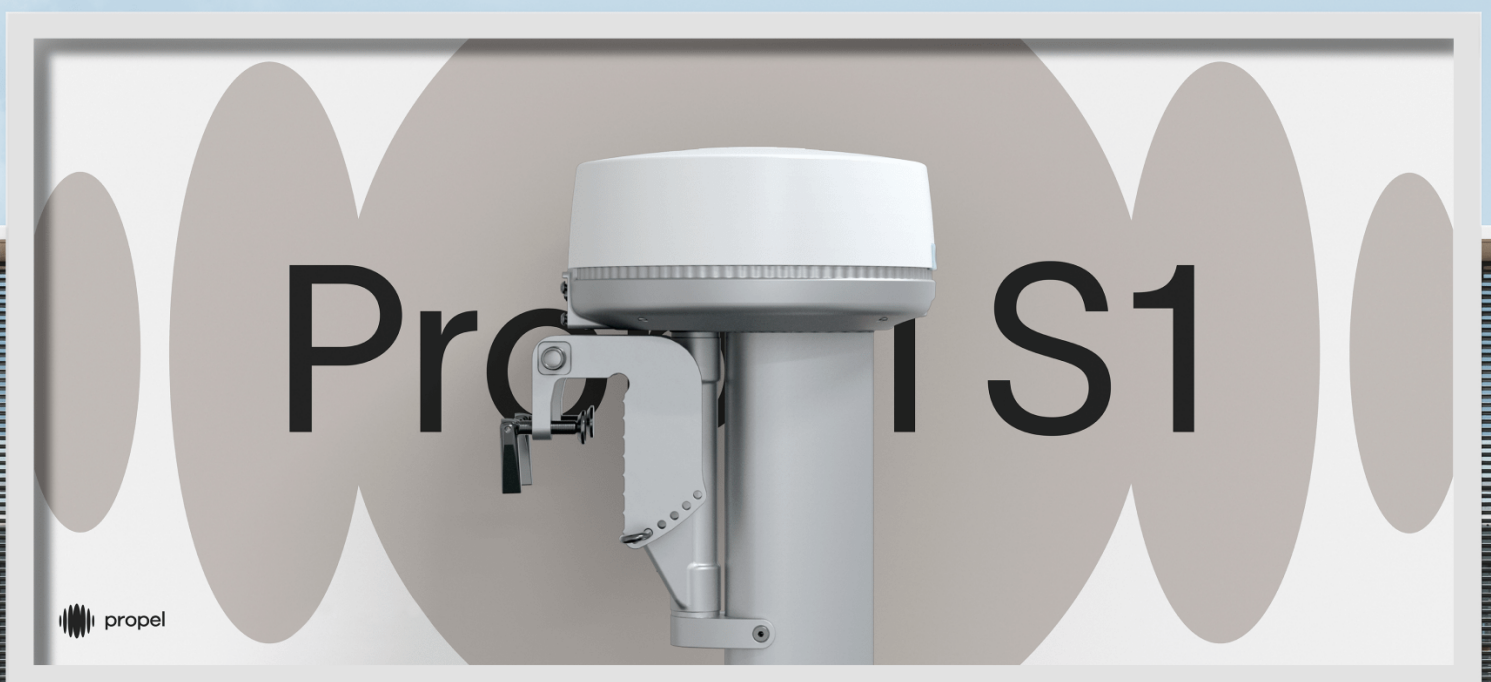
Actually it's like building a business itself: the first few years you invest in growing and expanding it to make sure it pays off in the long run. Just like a strong business, a strong brand is worth good money; for customers a strong brand can help justify a higher price. Similarly, a strong brand can help justify a higher price for investors or future buyers. If nurtured properly, your brand has the potential to yield exponential returns throughout the life of your business. In short; please keep looking after your child.



Be strict at times it truly matters.

Flexibility is key to stability when raising a kid. We don't want an overkill on rules. Parenting is not policing. But at the same time, we don't want messy parenting either. The same applies to brand guidelines. If for example your brand's design system is overly strict, that will create a very single-minded but also one-dimensional appearance. What we want is a clear outline, within which there's room to play around. Simplicity creates comfort, but we don't want things to be boring.

For Propel everything starts with a ripple. Obviously representing boat movement, but also representing our ambition in the market; throwing a pebble into the pond, changing things for the better. In the end, a ripple will start a wave. The multi-purposed use of the ripple proves to bring creative liberty, while everything still adds up. Its application ranges from a simple brand icon to UX-purposes in the tiller's display, and from blown-up communication backgrounds to website scroll animations.





No kid is the same.

People have the natural habit to try and fit in. If all neighborhood children play football, it's likely yours will too. In that context it's not too big a deal, but when applying for a specific school, talent pool or any other selection procedure, standing out gets you places.

The same applies to brands. If you look like the competition, you'll be recognizable in the short term. People will quickly understand what you have to offer, as they are familiar with what they see. In the long run though it's better to bang your own drum. Building a unique and outstanding brand might take a bit longer, but pays off when competition gets heavier: you naturally stand out.

If I'd ask you to visualize an outboard boat motor in your head, you probably think of one that's black or silver, likely with some kind of red or other contrasting stripe on the side - while sporting the amount of horsepower on at least two sides too. Propel's product has none of that, which means that at a first glance people probably need to process what they see. But as soon as you know the brand, you'll instantly recognize them on the water, whereas Honda, Yamaha or Mercury motors are more or less interchangeable.



It takes a village to raise a child.

Although your business might be you and your partner's baby, it can be wise to bring in external help in regards to their upbringing. There's a reason there's books, magazines, specialist care, consulting and other advice for all stages of children's life.

When building a business, there's this romantic image of trying to do everything yourself. But there's a reason why seasoned entrepreneurs have a better chance of succeeding in building their business too: they know their shortcomings, and act upon them: they bring the right people in, on time. Although interfering with someone else's parenting is one of the slipperiest social slopes out there, this might be the only case you do want help. A fresh, outside view resulting in a fresh futureproof brand.

So, from one parent to another: the younger your business, the faster it learns - depending on what you feed it, obviously. Clear choices will help in shaping a standout character for your little one. Please prepare them for the real world. Be consistent. Think about the long term. Be strict when needed. Be flexible when possible. Your kid, indeed, is unique. And please ask for help when in doubt. Happy co-parenting!



GERBEN VAN DER ZWAAARD

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Gerben van der Zwaard is a strategy director at Dentsu Creative and runs the agency's hub that specializes in brand positioning and identity work.

The past years, the team crafted the foundation for upcoming brands like Crisp, Check and Catawiki. The agency's latest work for new-kid-on-the-dock Propel sets sail to be the revolution in electric boat propulsion.

At the time of writing, Gerben has no kids.



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Collaboration is at the heart of our values and our unique propositions. We elevate the soul of our work with next generation craft skills needed to thrive in a modern world. We adopt a fluid talent.