SECOND EDITION

How to Buy Branding

How to avoid buying the wrong brand solution, now that everyone has AI.

distility

Axle Davids CEO

" With AI, the danger isn't bad brands. It's polished brands nobody believes in, starting with your own team. "

Axle Davids
Founder, Distility

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Branding Got Cheap. Clarity Didn't.

I still love and believe in branding. But here is the naked truth: when I wrote the first edition of this eBook in 2010, branding was broken and you, the buyer, had to beware.

Branding, as it was most often practised, was more occult than voodoo and more dangerous than lawn darts. It was slower than rust, more frustrating than roadwork, and had a return on investment somewhat less measurable than prayer.

Then the robots showed up.

Today, a large language model will happily deliver a competitor analysis, a brand promise, a positioning statement and three reasons to believe before your coffee gets cold. It is fast. It is nearly free. And frankly, a lot of it is pretty good.

That breaks something big. For decades, agencies and brand experts held something close to a monopoly on quality brand strategy. You had to hire someone who knew the secret handshake. Not anymore.

So branding is fixed, right? Not so fast.

AI can get you a good answer. It can't get you your answer. It can't pick the brand promise that fits both what your customers need and what your team is passionate enough to deliver. And it can't get a room full of people to agree on what makes your brand magnetic.

That is the new danger. When anyone can prompt a website or a campaign in an afternoon, a team that isn't convinced of what its brand means will produce slick communications that don't fit together.

AI is a master of sophisticated sameness.

AXLE DAVIDS

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buyer beware

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Read pages 22, 28 and 33.

Doing it in-house with AI?

Read pages 8, 18, 23, 27 and 34.

Stuck in politics?

Read pages 7, 16 and 26.

Tip: page numbers are clickable, and so is the cyan label at the top of every page. It brings you back here.

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buyer beware

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Brand Trap One: Brand Before Business

What do you sell?

Who is going to buy it?

Who else can offer them a competitive solution?

If the answer to any one of these questions eludes you, buying brand marketing will not make them magically appear. You've fallen into the first trap: doing branding before business strategy.

Here's the AI twist: business clarity is now easy to fake. Ask a chatbot for a positioning statement and it will write a confident one, whether or not your business has decided what it is.

And even if the answers feel obvious to you, don't assume they're obvious to everyone else. Leaders are often the last to notice that their team, their sales people and their customers each describe the business differently.

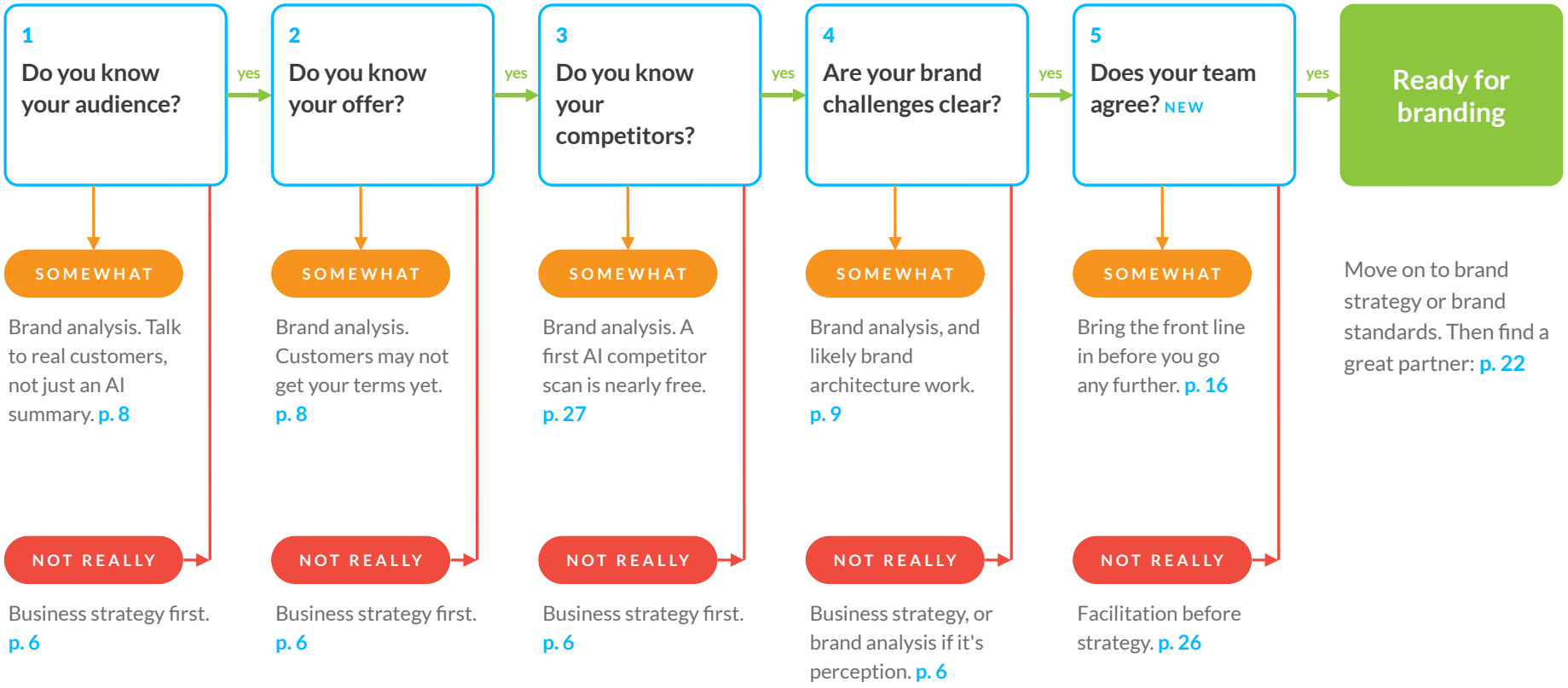
A polished brand built on an unresolved business strategy is still a house built on sand. It just has nicer drapes.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Ask five colleagues to answer the three questions separately, in writing. If the answers don't match, start there. Then take the readiness check on page 7.

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Are You Ready for Branding?



Read across. Every "yes" moves you one step closer to branding. Stop at the first red, and follow the page link to fix it. The full version, with every option spelled out, is in the Readiness Check tab of the free Vendor Scorecard: www.distility.com/how-to-buy-branding/

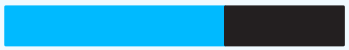
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The Basics: Four Types of Branding Work

There are no standard branding deliverables, so start with this baseline before you buy anything.

ONE
Brand Analysis

Learning about your audience, market, competitors, and your own brand's strengths and weaknesses.



AI DOES WELL:
Desk research, competitor scans, first audits

PEOPLE STILL:
Real customer conversations, your team's lived knowledge

TWO
Brand Strategy

Defining the ideas behind the best possible brand to support your business strategy.



AI DOES WELL:
Drafting promise, position, personality and reasons to believe

PEOPLE STILL:
Choosing the promise your team will stand behind, settling conflict

THREE
Brand Standards

Bringing the strategy to life in names, taglines, colours, logos and guidelines.

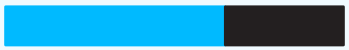


AI DOES WELL:
Names, copy styles, visual directions, templates

PEOPLE STILL:
Taste, trademark clearance, cultural checks

FOUR
Brand Marketing

Increasing, monitoring and managing awareness, consideration and loyalty.



AI DOES WELL:
Campaign drafts, variations, testing copy

PEOPLE STILL:
Keeping every channel saying the same thing

Bars are our rough take on how much of each type AI can carry today, not a measurement. Specific deliverables for each type are on page 9.

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The Basics: Deliverables for Each Type

One: Brand Analysis

CUSTOMER ANALYSIS
Primary audience, secondary audience, key influencers, trends, needs, existing perceptions of brand category

COMPETITOR ANALYSIS
Market position, brand position, brand promise, brand personality, strengths, weaknesses

CURRENT BRAND AUDIT
Current brand promise, personality, positioning, history, SWOT, values, portfolio analysis (for multiple brands)

PRIMARY RESEARCH SUMMARY NEW
What real customers and team members said, kept separate from AI-sourced findings

REPORT(S) FOR THE ABOVE

Two: Brand Strategy

BRAND PROMISE

BRAND PERSONALITY

BRAND POSITION
Customer, need, frame of reference, point of difference, reasons to believe

MARKET POSITION

VALUE PROPOSITION
Functional benefits, emotional benefits, features

BRAND ARCHITECTURE
(for multiple brands)

1PAGE BRAND STRATEGY NEW
The agreed promise, position, reasons to believe and personality on one page, ready for people and AI tools

STRATEGY DECISION RECORD NEW
Options considered, what was chosen, and why

REPORT(S) FOR THE ABOVE

Three: Brand Standards

VERBAL SYSTEM
Name, descriptor, domain name, tagline, headline style, copy style

VISUAL SYSTEM
Logo/wordmark, colour, typeface, style of layouts and imagery

DIGITAL TEMPLATES
Website, social profiles, email, product screens, motion and sound logo

DOCUMENT TEMPLATES
Slides, proposals, reports and invoices, built in the tools your team uses

AI ASSET KIT NEW
Approved prompts, image style references and on-brand examples for your AI tools

CHANNEL GUIDELINES
Social, video, advertising, events and signage

PRINT ESSENTIALS
Business cards, packaging and signage, where you still need them

Four: Brand Marketing

BRAND LAUNCH OR TRANSITION
Telling customers, partners and staff what changed, and why

EMPLOYEE BRAND EDUCATION
Including how to brief AI tools on the brand

CAMPAIGNS
Awareness, lead generation, sales and loyalty

CONTENT SYSTEM NEW
Repeatable formats your team (and its AI) can produce on-brand

BRAND TRACKING
Awareness, consideration and preference over time, from a baseline

BRAND LIFT STUDIES
Measuring the effect of a specific campaign against a control group

AI VISIBILITY MONITORING NEW
How AI assistants describe your brand when customers ask

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The Basics: What About Purpose, Vision, Mission and Values?

Valuable work. Just not the work you need to win customers.

Purpose, vision, mission and values matter most inside the company, and to the people you want to hire. That's employer branding.

To market to customers, you need a clear promise, position, personality and reasons to believe. Except on rare occasions, a purpose statement won't do that job for you.

WHEN THEY DO MATTER TO CUSTOMERS:

- Not-for-profits and causes, where the purpose is the reason people show up.
- Brands where the purpose and the promise are almost the same thing.

WHERE THEY MATTER MOST:

- Recruiting, onboarding and culture.
- Messaging for prospective employees.

WHY THEY'RE DIFFERENT:

Brand strategy gets better when you consult customers and your team. Purpose and values come from founders and culture. They're ill-suited to large group exercises, because a committee will average a conviction into something nobody holds.

THE AI TEST:

AI will write you a purpose and five values in ten seconds. That's the clearest sign they have to come from you.

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PHEW!

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Brand Trap Two: Buying Too Little

This trap is by far the biggest of all and leads to the worst brands of all. AI has made it bigger.

The typical story used to be a client who needed a website or a lead generation campaign, and asked a vendor to do a logo, tagline, or "figure out our brand" while they were at it.

Today the story is shorter: "Just have the AI do it." And it will. In seconds, you'll have a name, a tagline, a logo concept and a brand promise. They will sound plausible. They may even look good.

But the real person to blame here is still the buyer. If you think branding is just a logo, a slogan, or a prompt, you are kickin' it old-school, and not in a cool retro way.

Generated names and marks can look an awful lot like ones that already exist, so the trademark and cultural risks go up, not down. Who can own purely AI-generated work is still being sorted out, so ask a lawyer before you fall in love.

Most of all, a brand nobody on your team helped decide is a brand nobody on your team will defend.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Treat the logo and tagline as the last step of branding, not the first. Start with analysis and strategy, even a light version.

AI won't make your brand bad. It will make it beautifully average.

AXLE DAVIDS

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Brand Trap Three: Too Much, or Too Cheap

Too many vendors bank on the fact that you are lost in the branding quagmire, so they can sell you more than you really need.

In 2026, documents cost nothing to make. A vendor can generate a 60-page persona deck over lunch and bill you for a week. Volume is no longer proof of effort. Neither is polish.

Use the deliverables on page 9 as your baseline. Anything beyond it should earn its place.

The opposite trap is the bargain. A cut-rate deal sours fast: richer projects jump the queue, steps get cut, and work gets emailed instead of presented.

And now there's the bait and generate. The senior people who sold you the project quietly hand the thinking to AI, and you pay strategy rates for output you could have prompted yourself.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Ask what decision each deliverable helps you make, and who (or what) will do the work. Pay for decisions, not pages.

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Brand Trap Four: Proprietary Models



Since branding experts are masters of differentiation, it only makes sense that they will go the extra mile to come up with oh so sexy and unique jargon and systems.

Here's the good news: you now carry a jargon decoder in your pocket. Here's the bad news: a vendor can now invent an impressive, trademarked-sounding framework in about thirty seconds.

Just remember that branding deliverables are best when they are simple, easy to socialize, and easy to scale.

Proprietary models leave designers, writers, marketers, your own team, and now your AI tools at a disadvantage when it comes to interpreting and applying your brand strategy.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Insist on standard terms (see the glossary on page 36), and paste any proprietary model into an AI for a plain-English translation. If little is left, you have your answer.

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Proprietary Gobbledygook

If your branding expert, be they vendor, in-house resource or chatbot, can't use basic branding terms like analysis, strategy, promise, positioning, and personality, you are in for a world of pain. **Consider yourself warned.**

NEURAL BRAND DNA™
PROMPTCORE™
SYNTHETIC EMPATHY ENGINE™
AGENTIC POSITIONING™
LATENT PURPOSE MAPPING™
THE 7-VECTOR VOICE MATRIX™
ALGORITHMIC ARCHETYPES™
BRAND SINGULARITY™
PROMPT-TO-PURPOSE™ FRAMEWORK
QUANTUM TONALITY™
HYPER-PERSONA STACK™
DEEP RESONANCE MODEL™
THE INFINITE ESSENCE LOOP™

All invented by us, in under a minute. That's the problem. Plain-English definitions: page 36.

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Brand Trap Five: Playing Politics

We've all heard that politics have no place in polite conversation. Well, we're not talking those politics. We're talking about a brand trap where human nature is to blame.

When we wrote the first edition, brand marketers told us the hardest part of branding is getting stakeholders to agree on a direction. Most failed projects fail right there.

AI didn't fix this. It poured gasoline on it.

Every stakeholder can now walk into the meeting with 40 AI-generated taglines, three positioning statements and a mood board. More options means more to defend, more to debate and more ways to stall.

Of all the traps, this is the one AI is least able to solve, and the one that matters most.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Decide how you'll decide before you start. If egos are already in the room, bring in a Facilitator (page 26).

AI can make your whole team confident. Just not about the same thing.

AXLE DAVIDS

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Will Politics Derail Your Branding?

Nothing's certain, but here are some characteristics and dynamics of different types of teams. See which hit closest to home, and check out our recommendations for how to proceed.

IF THIS SOUNDS LIKE YOUR TEAM...	THEN YOU SHOULD...
Our projects are typically stymied by bureaucracy, and/or egos, and/or groupthink.	Try and find work at a new company. If you can't do that, employ one of the facilitator types we discuss later in this eBook.
We don't feel there is a need for rebranding, but someone wants to use it as an opportunity to make their mark.	Proceed with caution. Unnecessary branding can be seen as a sign of weakness, and can just as easily undo previous branding efforts.
We lack brand experience, have strong (even domineering) players, and/or our leadership is disengaged from this kind of decision-making.	Proceed with caution. Your project could be a great learning exercise and a chance for new voices to be heard. Just don't let it stall.
Everyone on our team is already prompting their own brand materials. NEW	Hit pause on new content. Align on a shared brand foundation first, then give everyone the same brand context to work from. Otherwise, you'll get nine brands for the price of one.
We openly discuss business and marketing concepts, explore new ideas, and are capable of reaching a healthy consensus.	Proceed confidently into your branding work.

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Two New Brand Traps for the AI Era

Trap Six: The Ballpark Brand

A trap you can set for yourself. You prompt an AI well, maybe add some AI-generated "customer insight", and get back a promise, position and personality that all sound right. Everyone nods. Done.

Except no real customer was asked, and nobody would fight for it. AI can get you into the ballpark, but a ballpark brand isn't a home run. Your promise has to fit what customers need and what your team is passionate enough to deliver. AI can only guess at both.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Talk to real customers and label every finding human or AI. Use the AI's draft to start a real conversation, and commit only to what your team would fight for.

Trap Seven: Brand Sprawl

Every department now has AI, and every department is making things: the website, the sales deck, the job postings, the support scripts. Each one looks sophisticated. None of them agree.

Sprawl happens when a team isn't convinced of what its brand means but can produce unlimited communications anyway. The results range from confusing to problematic: promises one team can't keep, claims nobody approved.

DO THIS INSTEAD:

Agree on one brand foundation and capture it in a 1Page Brand Strategy (page 34). Then give it to every person and every AI tool.

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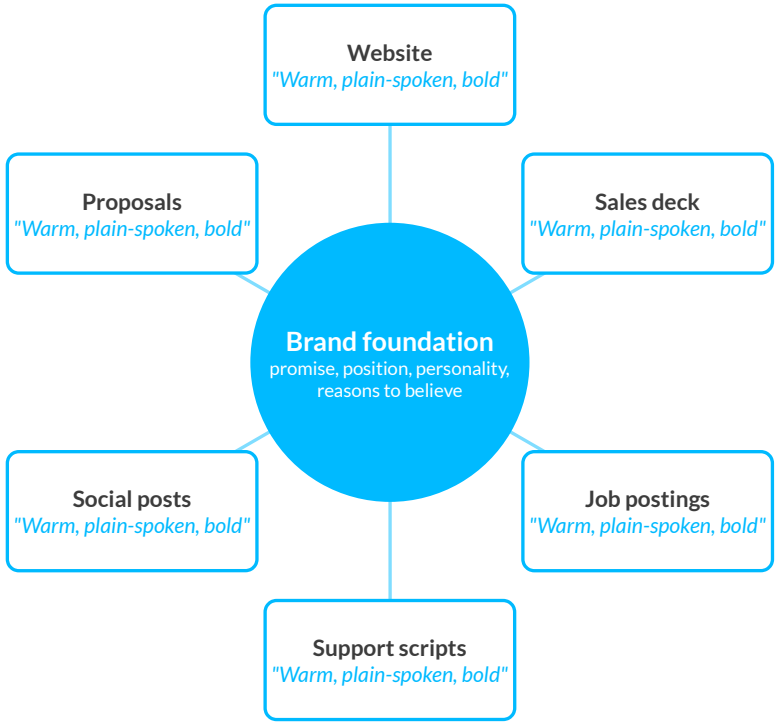
Brand Sprawl vs a Shared Foundation

SPRAWL



Six prompts. Six brands. One confused customer.

SHARED FOUNDATION



One foundation. One brand. As many prompts as you like.

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" AI can create great ideas. But a great idea that doesn't fit your strategy, promise, position and personality doesn't bring your customer clarity. It brings chaos. "

Axle Davids
Founder, Distility

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buyer prepare

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Who Should Do the Work?

Whichever way you go, AI will be on your team. The real question is who supplies the judgment, and who gets your people to agree.

DO IT IN-HOUSE, WITH AI

Great for engaging your team. Also an easy way to drown in options.

HIRE BRAND EXPERTS

They know the work. Some still run a slow, expensive process built before AI.

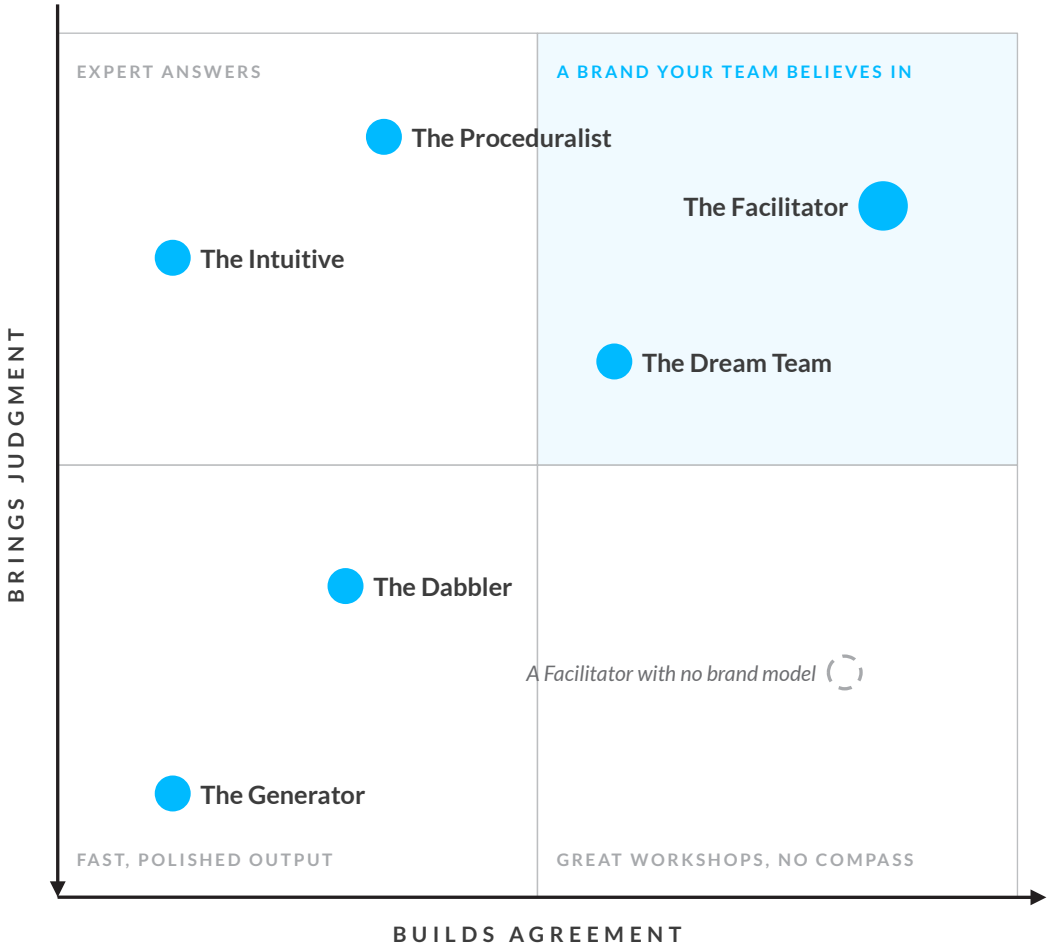
A DESIGNER OR GENERALIST

Pragmatic, and AI makes their strategy look the part. Check the thinking.

BRING IN A FACILITATOR

Your team's knowledge and AI's speed, plus someone whose job is getting people to agree.

First, meet the newest member of every team: **AI, page 23.**



Our take on where each character tends to land. Click one to read its profile.

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AI as a Team Member

Whoever you hire, AI will be in the room.

Treat it like a brilliant, tireless junior team member who has read everything and experienced nothing.

GIVE IT:

- Desk research and competitor scans
- First drafts of every deliverable
- Translating jargon into plain English
- Generating options to react to
- Applying a finished brand across channels, once the brand is clear

KEEP FOR PEOPLE:

- Talking to real customers
- Choosing the brand promise and position
- Working through conflicting points of view
- Committing, as a team, to what the brand means
- Deciding what not to say

AI plays it safe. Safe brands are same brands.

AXLE DAVIDS

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The Proceduralist and The Intuitive

The Proceduralist

The luxury tailor of branding. A formal, high-touch approach, with numerous meetings and comprehensive planning. Results are often impressive and well founded. Strong on analysis, monitoring and much of strategy. Creative expressions like names and campaigns may be a stretch.

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- The Readiness Check points to brand analysis.
- You want a strategic, customized, in-depth approach.
- You're ready for a formal, multi-phased process.

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- You lack the time, budget or patience for lots of meetings.
- Your brand challenges are routine.

BEWARE OF:

- Paying for too much "thinking" and not enough action.
- Senior rates for AI-produced documents. NEW

WHAT AI CHANGES:

Research and documentation are exactly what AI does best. A Proceduralist now earns their fee through rigour, real primary research, and knowing which analyses actually matter.

The Intuitive

Somewhat like a mystic, the Intuitive feels out the missing pieces and visualizes a more compelling brand. Little formal process, but with the right people and ideas, real magic, efficiently even. Brand identity is their sweet spot. Don't expect a paper trail.

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- You have concrete ideas about your brand.
- Your brand is not in crisis.
- You need professional pieces, fast.

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- You need to see a plan up front.
- Your team hasn't committed to core brand concepts yet.

BEWARE OF:

- Those who can't prove success with the intuitive approach.
- "Intuition" that is really picking a favourite from AI output. NEW

WHAT AI CHANGES:

When anyone can generate a hundred options, picking the right one becomes more valuable, not less. Good taste is having a moment.

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The Dabbler and The Dream Team

The Dabbler

The Dabbler can do branding, but "can" doesn't mean "should". Branding isn't their core competency, though industry expertise or closeness to the project can make up for it. Confidence, interest and aptitude can still drive good outcomes.

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- Someone on your team has had a career in a brand-centred industry.
- Your team wants to learn branding best practices.
- You can only afford one resource.

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- You can't afford the learning curve.
- You need a clear, proven solution.

BEWARE OF:

- Skipping brand analysis and strategy.
- Names and logos that infringe trademarks or carry bad associations.
- Mistaking fluent AI output for expertise. NEW

WHAT AI CHANGES:

With AI, everyone is now a capable Dabbler. Great for learning and first drafts. Dangerous when fluent output gets mistaken for experience.

The Dream Team

A combination of Proceduralists, Dabblers and Intuitives, often inside a bigger, pricier marketing, advertising or design machine. You get structure, creativity and execution across the full spectrum of deliverables, if you can afford it.

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- You have the budget for a team of this nature.
- You see branding as part of a bigger strategy.
- You see branding as a continuous investment.

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- You don't have the budget, or the time to manage a Dream Team yourself.

BEWARE OF:

- The bait and switch: the team that sells the dream may not do the work.
- Paying for headcount AI has quietly replaced. NEW

WHAT AI CHANGES:

Big teams have lost their production advantage. A small team with good AI habits can match their output. What a Dream Team should still offer is breadth of judgment.

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The Facilitator and The Generator

The Facilitator

Often from coaching, team building or organizational development, with a core competency in branding to boot. Uses workshops and structured conversation, and relies on your team's expertise to reach decisions about customers, competition and brand direction.

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- You or they are clear on a brand model.
- You trust your team's ideas, not yet its agreement.
- Many people will create brand content with AI. NEW

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- You want an expert to fix it for you.

BEWARE OF:

- Teammates who won't explore, or won't commit to ideas not their own.
- Facilitators with no brand model. NEW

WHAT AI CHANGES:

Facilitation is the one job AI can't do yet. A survey collects opinions. Only a facilitated conversation lets people work out their differences, and commit.

The Generator NEW

Produces an endless supply of polished options, fast and cheap. Sometimes a vendor, sometimes a Dabbler with a subscription, sometimes you at 11 p.m. on your fourth cup of tea. The work looks finished. Did anyone think about it?

ADD TO YOUR TEAM IF:

- You already have a clear strategy to apply.
- Someone with judgment will choose.

FIND A BETTER MATCH IF:

- Your strategy isn't settled.
- Your team needs to own the result.

BEWARE OF:

- No analysis, no judgment, nobody accountable.
- Made-up facts, delivered with total confidence.

WHAT AI CHANGES:

The Generator isn't bad, just incomplete. With a clear strategy and a team that agrees, it's a superpower. Alone, it's the express lane to Brand Sprawl.

Shameless Plug

Here at Distility, we are brand facilitators with a technology twist. Our Distility 1day1brand workshop uses AI for speed and keeps your team at the centre of every decision. 1 team + 1 day = 1 brand. Find out more at distility.com.

Prompts That Help

The jargon decoder

Here is a branding framework a vendor showed us: [paste]. Translate each term into standard branding language (analysis, strategy, promise, position, personality). Flag anything with no standard equivalent.

The competitor scan

List the main competitors for [our offer] serving [our customer] in [our market]. For each, summarize their positioning, promise and personality from their public website. Mark anything you're unsure of.

The interview prep

Draft ten open questions for a 20-minute interview with a customer about why they chose us, what almost stopped them, and how they describe us to others.

Argue against us

Here is our brand position and promise: [paste]. Argue against it, first as a sceptical customer, then as our toughest competitor. What would make it fall apart?

The sameness test

Here are positioning statements from us and three competitors, names removed: [paste]. Could you tell which is ours? What, if anything, makes it different?

The boldness test

Here is our draft brand promise: [paste]. Rewrite it three times, each bolder than the last. For each one, tell us what risk we would be taking, and what we would have to deliver to earn it.

Always check what AI tells you, especially facts about competitors. These prompts help you think. They don't decide for you.

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buyer decide

Pop quiz! Not for you. For anyone you might hire.

Eight lines of questioning, three questions each. The full set, with what a good answer sounds like, is in the free Vendor Scorecard: **www.distility.com/how-to-buy-branding/**

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Ask Them: Experience and Brand Model

01 What is Your Experience?

The best way to know how someone can help you is to understand how they've helped others: who they worked with, what kind of work, and what kind of brands.

THREE TO ASK:

- What was your most successful project, and your least? Why?
- What share of your work is analysis, strategy, standards and marketing?
- How has your work changed since AI arrived? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **Specific projects, specific results, and honesty about what didn't work.**

02 What is Your Brand Model?

Work with someone who can tell you, in plain English, what their brand model is, and connect it to tangible deliverables. Hear a term you don't know? Ask for the more popular word.

THREE TO ASK:

- Draw how you'd explain a brand to our team. Is the diagram your own invention?
- How did you apply this model to two completed projects?
- What options did you consider and reject, and why? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **Plain English, standard terms, and evidence of judgment.**

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Ask Them: Milestones and Who Delivers

03 What's Delivered Between Milestones?

Get a clear answer on what each milestone entails, when it arrives, and in what form. Scrubbed client documents are fine: you're after the form, not the content.

THREE TO ASK:

- Can we see a project plan and sample documents from a past project?
- How much is presented and decided live, rather than emailed?
- Which documents are drafted by AI, and how are they checked? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **Organized answers, live decisions, and a clear line between AI drafts and human judgment.**

04 Who Will Deliver?

Beware the bait and switch, and its new cousin, the bait and generate: the top guns sell it, then a junior resource or a chatbot does it.

THREE TO ASK:

- Can we see the CVs or LinkedIn profiles of everyone on the project?
- Which parts of the work will a person do, and which will AI do? NEW
- Will anyone (or anything) else do the work without our permission?

LISTEN FOR: **The people who sold it are the people who do it.**

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Ask Them: Your Team and ROI

05 How Will You Leverage Our Team?

A brand is only as good as the team that delivers it, so find out exactly how they plan to use yours.

THREE TO ASK:

- What do you do when stakeholders disagree about the brand?
- How do you get people to work out differences together, not just fill in a survey? NEW
- Will our team's AI tools be able to use the brand you deliver? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **A real method for turning disagreement into commitment.**

06 (Trick Question) What ROI Can We Expect?

Measurement has come a long way since 2010. Brand tracking and lift studies show shifts in awareness and preference, and you can now check how AI describes you. What nobody can do is prove exactly how much revenue the brand caused. Beware anyone who promises that, now with AI-made charts.

THREE TO ASK:

- What will you measure before we start, so we have a baseline?
- Will you use brand tracking, a lift study or an AI visibility check, and what will each cost? NEW
- Can we talk to past clients about working with you?

LISTEN FOR: **A baseline, a realistic measure, and honesty about what can't be proven.**

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Ask Them: Scalability and AI

07 How Sociable and Scalable Is It?

Now that everyone can create brand communications with AI, your brand has to be easy for people to grasp and apply, and easy for their AI tools to follow.

THREE TO ASK:

- How will our team see their passion reflected in the strategy?
- Can our team apply the brand without outside experts?
- Will you deliver the brand in a form our AI tools can use? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **Simple enough for any team member, and any AI tool, to apply.**

08 How Do You Use AI?

This line didn't exist in 2010. The right answer to "do you use AI?" is yes. The wrong answers are the vague ones.

THREE TO ASK:

- What do you use AI for, and what do you never use it for? NEW
- Where does our confidential information go? NEW
- Which findings come from real people, and which from AI? NEW

LISTEN FOR: **AI for speed and breadth. People for judgment and agreement.**

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Before You Sign: A Checklist

- [ ] We've taken the readiness check, and nothing is at STOP.
See page 7

- [ ] We know which of the four types of branding work we're buying, and which we're not.
See page 8

- [ ] Every deliverable is tied to a decision it helps us make.
See page 13

- [ ] Our candidate explained their brand model in plain English.
See page 29

- [ ] We've seen a past project plan and sample documents.
See page 30

- [ ] We know who will do the work, and which parts AI will do.
See page 30

- [ ] We know where our confidential information will go.
See page 32

- [ ] Real customer research is in the plan, labelled separately from AI findings.
See page 18

- [ ] There's a clear process for settling disagreement and getting the team to commit.
See page 31

- [ ] We'll end up with a 1Page Brand Strategy our team agreed on, ready for people and AI tools.
See page 34

Ten ticks? Sign with confidence. Fewer? Go back to the pages that cover the gaps.

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Your 1Page Brand Strategy

This is the finish line, not the starting line.

Fill it in only after your team has done the work and agreed: real customers heard, options explored, criteria applied, decisions made together.

Then, and only then, hand it to your AI tools, new hires and vendors. Paste it at the top of every AI conversation about your brand.

If it doesn't fit on one page, it isn't agreed yet.

AUDIENCE
Who we serve first, and what they care about most.

BRAND PROMISE
We promise you [the one benefit we always deliver].

BRAND POSITION
We are the [brand category] that [our most dramatic point of difference].

REASONS TO BELIEVE
The provable facts behind our promise and our position: [fact], [fact], [fact].

BRAND PERSONALITY
Our style is [trait], [trait] and [trait]. Never [trait].

TOP BENEFITS
Ranked. Number one is our promise.

TOP FEATURES
Ranked. Number one leads our position.

VOICE
Do: [how we sound]. Don't: [how we never sound].

WORDS WE USE / WORDS WE AVOID
Our terms for what we do, and the jargon we skip.

CLAIMS
What we can prove. What we never claim.

EXAMPLE
A short paragraph that sounds exactly like us.

AGREED BY THE TEAM ON _____ THEN GIVEN TO OUR AI ON _____

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Your Final Decision

Congratulations, you made it!

Here's the big idea to take with you. Content is no longer scarce. Anyone can generate a brand strategy. Very few teams can commit to one together. And a brand your team believes in is what keeps every AI-assisted website, deck and post pulling in the same direction.

So use AI for what it's good at: speed, breadth and drafts. Use people for judgment, choice and commitment. And until AI can facilitate a real decision among a room full of people, make sure someone on your team, or someone you hire, can.

Before you decide, download the free Vendor Scorecard. It has the readiness check and every question in this eBook, and it scores your candidates for you.

Now, go on out there and build a better brand.

Branding is free now.

Agreement isn't.

Download the Vendor Scorecard here

Glossary: Plain-English Branding Terms

Brand model
The handful of ideas your team defines and agrees on. The simplest thing that works: promise, position, personality and reasons to believe.

Brand promise
The single most magnetic benefit you commit to deliver, every time. It completes "We promise you..." One benefit beats two or three.

Benefit
What your audience gets or feels. Features exist so someone can benefit: waterproof, so you stay dry.

Feature
What your offer has or does. Features are the raw material for points of difference.

Brand position
Your most dramatic point of difference, combined with a brand category your audience instantly understands.

Point of difference
A competitive feature that is dramatically different to your audience. Strong positions are unique ("the leader in"), weak ones merely different ("a leader in").

Brand category
The frame of reference your audience uses to understand what you are. Changing the category can make a position more unique: "Midtown Toronto's only..."

Reasons to believe
Quantifiable, easy-to-prove facts, like a patent or an analyst rating, that make your promise and position credible.

Brand personality
The style or voice of your brand: authentic, compelling and competitive. Avoid earned traits like "trusted".

Brand criteria
The tests your team agrees on before deciding. For a promise: is it compelling, emotional, and can we deliver it?

1Page Brand Strategy
Your agreed brand model on a single page: ranked benefits, top features, reasons to believe and personality traits.

Business strategy
What you sell, who buys it, and who else they could buy from. Agree on it before branding begins.

Slogan or tagline
The wordsmithed expression of an idea. It rests on the promise, not the other way around.

Seductive idea
A fresh, clever or bold idea that wins the room but misses the strategy. Usually a tagline.

Build-in, not buy-in
Involve the people who will deliver the brand in creating it, instead of selling it to them afterwards.

The four types of work
Analysis (learning), strategy (deciding), standards (expressing) and marketing (promoting) your brand.

Brand Sprawl
Lots of polished communications that don't agree, because the team doesn't share one brand.

Purpose, vision, mission, values
Why you exist, where you're going, what you do and what you stand for. Most useful for culture and employer branding.

Sophisticated sameness
What AI produces by default: polished, plausible, and interchangeable with everyone else's.

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Before You Go...

Don't let your friends and colleagues fall into a brand trap.

Send them this eBook, or the link: www.distility.com/how-to-buy-branding/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Axle Davids, founder of Distility, is a brand facilitator who has spent more than two decades helping teams agree on brands they believe in. In 2001, he established aXle Branding, working with innovators like AT&T Mobility, Applied Biosystems and AutoShare Car Sharing Network. By 2008, he had built his own software so cross-functional teams could get branding done in a day, which became Distility 1day1brand.

That work evolved into Distility, a Toronto firm with a pragmatic, team-centred approach to branding. Lately, he has been putting AI through its paces on real brand work, which is how this edition came to be.

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